Putin's Dark Ages

Political Neomedievalism and Re-Stalinization in Russia

DINA KHAPAEVA

ROUTLEDGE HISTORIES OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

ROUTLEDGE

"In *Putin's Dark Ages*, Dina Khapaeva offers an original interpretation of the Russian president and his apocalyptic, reactionary worldview, arguing that it is not just neo-Stalinist, but neo-medievalist: clearly written, deeply researched and thought provoking."

Anne Applebaum, The Atlantic, *USA*

"In this fascinating and innovative work, Dina Khapaeva offers a new perspective on the Putin regime as part of a wider cultural phenomenon, that of neo-medievalism in the totalitarian political imagination. This book is a must for those seeking to understand Putin's war on Ukraine and his politics of memory."

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"*Putin's Dark Ages* is a strikingly timely intervention in the study of Russian history, memory, and politics. Before February 24, 2022, it was still possible to argue that the phenomena covered in this book—neo-medievalism, neo-Eurasianism, the celebration of Ivan the Terrible and Joseph Stalin, etc.—were curious, but marginal developments. As Khapaeva compellingly shows, they are in fact crucial and central features of Russian society today—symptoms of a distinctive anti-modern worldview that has gained an extraordinary and inimical potency."

Kevin M.F. Platt, *University of Pennsylvania, USA*

PUTIN'S DARK AGES

Two decades before the war against Ukraine, a "special operation" was launched against Russian historical memory, aggressively reshaping the nation's understanding of its history and identity. The Kremlin's militarization of Russia through World War II propaganda is well documented, but the glorification of Russian medieval society and its warlords as a source of support for Putinism has yet to be explored. This book offers the first comparison of Putin's political neomedievalism and re-Stalinization and introduces the concept of mobmemory to the study of right-wing populism. It argues that the celebration of the *oprichnina*, Ivan the Terrible's regime of state terror (1565–1572), has been fused with the rehabilitation of Stalinism to reconstruct the Russian Empire. The post-Soviet case suggests that the global obsession with the Middle Ages is not purely an aesthetic movement but a potential weapon against democracy.

The book is intended for students, scholars, and non-specialists interested in understanding Russia's anti-modern politics and the Russians' support for the terror unleashed against Ukraine.

Dina Khapaeva is Professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, USA. Among her latest books are *Crimes sans châtiment* (2023) and *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (2017). Until 2009, she was Director for Research at Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and a professor at St. Petersburg State University, Russia.

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Designed cover image: Sergiyev Posad. Russia. 9 October, 2021. A man dressed in a Streltsy costume walks against the background of Orthodox Christianity frescoes at the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius in Sergiyev Posad, an ancient town near Moscow. Streltsy were the units of Russian firearm infantry from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries and also a social stratum. © Nikolay Vinokurov / Alamy Stock Photo.

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In memory of my mother

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

> [T]he Polish-Ukrainian forces were crushed. In addition, the Russian troops were tasked with destroying the maximum amount of manpower, buildings, and other structures. As a result, by October 5 – the end of the Russian-Polish-Ukrainian war – more than 600,000 people had been killed. More than two-thirds were civilians, while Russian losses amounted to 11,000. Ancient cities such as Warsaw and Krakow, and many others, were razed, and Lvov was literally wiped off the face of the earth, apparently quite deliberately.[1]

Thus ends the reconstruction of the Russian Empire in the novel *The Third Empire: Russia as It Ought to Be* (2006). Its author, Mikhail Yuriev (1959–2019), a former deputy speaker of the Russian State Duma and a successful businessman, was a member of the political council of the extreme nationalist International Eurasian Movement.[2] Much celebrated by the Russian far right, Yuriev's utopia is one of many texts that have shaped Putin's political agenda. Atrocities in Ukraine – the killing of civilians, the devastation of cities, and the destruction wrought on a peaceful neighboring country – painfully illustrate the degree to which *The Third Empire* anticipated Russia's war strategy. Functioning almost as Putin's geopolitical handbook, the novel prefigures with astonishing precision Russia's military assaults: the war with Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), the incursion into Donetsk and Luhansk (2014), and the 2022 war against Ukraine. Pronouncements from war hawks like former Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, who has stated unambiguously that Poland "must not exist for us while there is no one but Russophobes in power"[3] and Ukraine "will disappear from the world map,"[4] mirror Yuriev's worldview. Yuriev's novel, like many other far-right publications, fantasizes about Russia's conquest of Europe and the USA (Ukraine and Poland, in their view, being merely collateral targets). But the focus of these texts is on Russia's future social structure and governance. The

return to the Middle Ages, with their autocracy and religious fundamentalism, so central to Yuriev's utopia, is enthusiastically endorsed by the Russian far right. Yuriev describes the Russian future as an autocratic empire built upon a society of estates and ruled by *oprichniks*, a latter-day version of Ivan the Terrible's personal guard that terrorized Russia, on his direct orders, from 1565 to 1572:

> If now, in 2053, Russia's Constitution were to be put to a referendum of all citizens, not even a quarter of them would support it. But that's the point – that no one but oprichniks can participate in referenda. […] So I believe that the Russian political system, built on a society of estates, will remain absolutely stable in the foreseeable future. […] There will, of course, be crises and even uprisings – they, in fact, have already taken place […] – but the oprichniks will drown any revolts in blood and with pleasure, because for them, […] this will be a duel with the Devil. I can't imagine who and what can shake, let alone sweep away, the oprichnina's power – which, by the way, contrary to what some of us think, is not at all bloody and not, by and large, repressive.[5]

Unlike the Kremlin's aggressive foreign politics, its militaristic cult of World War II, and its xenophobic and gender-intolerant discourse, the far-right projects for reinstating the premodern condition have attracted little scholarly attention. Yet they are crucial to the understanding of Putinism.

I advance the argument that prior to the "special operation" – the Kremlin's official name for its disastrous war against Ukraine – another special operation was being conducted on Russians' historical memory, aggressively reshaping the nation's self-perception and its understanding of history. The multifaceted manipulation of history implemented since 2000 contains a critically important component – political neomedievalism, a history politics that exploits medieval allusions for anti-democratic purposes. By glorifying the Russian medieval past in a way that is reminiscent of the idolization of the German Middle Ages by the Nazis and their forerunners,[6] the Kremlin is seeking to convince Russians that a theocratic monarchy, extreme social inequalities, and state terror are a matter of national pride and the traditional Russian way of governance, and that the reconstruction of empire is Russia's legitimate objective. This massive memory politics ranges from state and grassroots initiatives, laws, monuments, memorials, museums, political pamphlets, and historiography to the writings of religious and sectarian activists, popular films, and fiction.

Political neomedievalism also merges with re-Stalinization. The "timid re-Stalinization" in the late Soviet era of the 1960s and 1970s was followed by a radical de-Stalinization under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in the late 1980s and 1990s. Then, under Putin, re-Stalinization was re-introduced as a full-fledged memory politics. The two main instances of state terror in Russian history – Ivan the Terrible's *oprichnina* and Stalin's repressions – have therefore been as pivotal to my research as they are to post-Soviet historical memory and public debates.

This book documents the existence of an organized neomedieval memory politics that has yet to become commonly recognized because its expressions are usually regarded as casual, unrelated events. Offering the first systematic comparison of post-Soviet neomedievalism with re-Stalinization from 2000 to 2023, I show that these trends in post-Soviet memory politics promote similar values and ideas. They have been instrumental in militarizing public opinion, consolidating public backing for the occupation of Crimea, and presenting the invasion of Ukraine as part of Russia's perennial conflict with an aggressive West, from the Middle Ages to the present.

My approach rests on the premise that a meaningful grasp of Russian history, memory, and culture is impossible outside of the global context, not least because of the West's centrality to Russia's national identity. Be it idealization or hatred, Russia's astonishing preoccupation with the West throughout its history constitutes the only true uniqueness of "Russianness," the core of the Russian sense of nation.

Political neomedievalism is not, however, an exclusively post-Soviet phenomenon. Although the US lags behind Russia in the governmental exploitation of neomedievalism, the rise of neomedievalism under Donald Trump, from the Charlottesville far-right marchers to the storming of the Capitol, where neomedieval symbolism featured quite prominently, has become a new American reality. The Kraken, a gigantic sea creature of ancient Scandinavian folklore, has been co-opted to promote Trump's fabrication of a stolen election.[7] The QAnon conspiracy theory claiming that Trump is fighting a Satan-worshipping cabal remains widespread among his supporters.[8] Trump and his associates frequently resort to medieval allusions when describing their actions: he seemed pleased, for example, to hear his border-wall project being called "medieval."[9] In a similar vein, former White House strategist Steve Bannon declared that "I'd actually like to go back to the old times of Tudor England, I'd put the heads on pikes[…]"[10] (The advocacy of terror comes naturally to admirers of political neomedievalism, no matter their geographical location.)[11] Mimicking Trump, Bannon also spoke approvingly of Putin, and especially of the founder of the International Eurasian Movement, Alexander Dugin,[12] notorious for his neo-fascist views and his calls to subjugate Ukraine.[13] That said, Trump's critics also frequently avail themselves of uncomplimentary medieval metaphors, as do Putin's opponents in Russia.

Since Putin perceives democracy as a threat to his rule, the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2020 were enthusiastically presented in the pro-Kremlin news as an outbreak of neomedieval chaos. One mainstream media source gleefully titled its piece "The Capitol Stormed by Shamans and Vikings,"[14] while another, taking advantage of Western self-criticism, quoted Jill Dougherty, a CNN journalist, as having said that the US would never again be able to put itself forward as a model of democracy.[15]

The worldwide obsession with "everything medieval" is often mistaken for a merely aesthetic movement. The post-Soviet context, however, lays bare its

anti-democratic potential. A dissection of Putinism helps trace kindred factors that could lead to similar political outcomes even in countries with a stronger tradition of democracy. As Anne Applebaum warns, "[g]iven the right conditions, any society can turn against democracy."[16]

My study identifies two common factors that underlie the rise of political neomedievalism in Russia and the West. First, the crisis of the future – the lack of confidence that the future will be better than the present and disbelief in social progress – fostered the conviction that historical time could turn backward and history could be repeated. The neomedieval mindset, including a fascination with eschatological beliefs, emanates from this reversed historical temporality. The disregard for human life and dignity, commodified by popular culture and promoted by various political, religious, and philosophical teachings in Russia and the West, is the second factor. The rise of neomedieval memory politics and commodified anti-humanism may be viewed as manifestations of the global crisis of liberal democracy.

*

My mother was nine when she witnessed the arrest of her father, Kirill Fedorovich Nikolayuk, a school principal in Gomel, a city in Belarus, just days before the war began. He perished in the GULAG, and to this day, we do not know where he was buried. Amidst the chaos of the Nazi advance, my grandmother, a teacher of mathematics, and my mother were not arrested as family members of an enemy of the people. They were evacuated shortly before Gomel was occupied in August 1941. My grandmother never remarried, and I grew up listening to her stories about my grandfather. This family history is the origin of my interest in the memory of Stalinism and its influence on Russian politics. Research on this subject is important because the legacy of that era continues to exert a tragic influence on families and countries.

For this book, I have built on works by Ruslan Skrynnikov, Lev Klein, Aron Gurevich, and Yury Bessmertny. Their research and personal experiences undermined the Soviet historical dogmas and Russian nationalism, and have been formative for my understanding of history since my student days.

Although I have never applied the *lieux de mémoire* approach to Russia as Pierre Nora wished I would when I was working on the Russian translation of *Les Lieux de mémoire*, his methodology has always been highly relevant to my research. Gabrielle M. Spiegel has been an important influence on my thinking about historical memory, and I am grateful for her suggestions regarding parts of this book.

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Emory University's Department of Russian and East Asian Languages and Cultures and its Chair, Juliette Stapanian-Apkarian, offered me a visiting scholar appointment during my research semester, and I am thankful for this opportunity.

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Jean Viard published the second edition of Nina Kehayan's excellent translation of my book *Crimes sans châtiment* for Les Éditions de l'Aube (2023), and I want to thank them both here.

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If there is any good in this book, it is all thanks to Nikolay Koposov, my husband and my most generous and vigorous critic, whose tremendous moral and intellectual support are vital to me in everything I do.

Notes

1 Mikhail Yuriev, *Tret'ia imperiia: Rossiia, kotoraia dolzhna byt'* (St. Petersburg: Limbus-Press, 2007), 102.
2 Putin's high opinion of Yuriev's book was well known among Russian journalists. See Maria Snegovaya, "Ukrainskie sobytiia davno opisany v lyubimoi knige Kremlia," *Vedomosti*, March 2, 2014, and Ilia Shepelin, "Ia patriot svoiei strany, no den'gi zdes' delat' neudobno," *Republic.ru*, April 24, 2014. Yuriev had close ties with several members of Putin's inner circle. He was an investor in American Ethane jointly with Roman Abramovich and Alexander Voloshin, chief of Putin's Administration from 1999 to 2003. Igor Sechin, Putin's confidant and former KGB agent, appointed Mikhail Leontiev, Yuriev's protégé and his partner in "Odnako," the talk show and media resource, as vice-president of Rosneft in 2013.
3 https://twitter.com/MedvedevRussiaE/status/1652288155918188545
4 https://vk.com/dm?w=wall53083705_54704
5 Yuriev, *Tret'ia imperiia*, 199, 203.

6 On the influence of medieval mythology on Nazism, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany 1890–1935* (Wellingborough, UK: The Aquarian Press, 1985).
7 Mallory Simon and Sara Sidner, "Decoding the extremist symbols and groups at the Capitol Hill insurrection," *CNN*, January 11, 2021.
8 Ros Atkins, "Facebook deleting QAnon pages – But what is it?" *BBC News*, October 9, 2022.
9 Matthew Gabriele, "Trump Says Medieval Walls Worked. They Didn't," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2019. His son, Donald Trump Jr., was photographed carrying a weapon that sported medieval emblems. David Shortell, "Photo of Donald Trump Jr. holding a rifle raises flags with hate group researchers," *CNN Politics*, January 7, 2020.
10 Mary Papenfuss, "Steve Bannon: I'd Put Anthony Fauci's Head On A Pike As A 'Warning,'" *Huffington Post*, November 5, 2020.
11 On the close links between the Russian and the Western far right, see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
12 Brandon W. Hawk, "Why far-right nationalists like Steve Bannon have embraced a Russian ideologue," *The Washington Post*, April 16, 2019.
13 "Eurasianism operates at many different levels[…] It is an intellectual idea, a political program and […] governmental policy." Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown, "Empires of the Mind: Eurasianism and Alternative History in Post-Soviet Russia," in *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, eds. Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 135. I do not discuss Lev Gumilev and Alexander Panarin here, since neither of them took much interest in the New Middle Ages.
14 "Na shturm Kapitoliia shli shamany i vikingi," *vesti.ru*, January 7, 2021.
15 "V Vashingtone politsiia tri chasa otbivala Kapitolii u protestuiushchikh," *vesti.ru*, January 7, 2021.
16 Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 14.

INTRODUCTION

Putinism at War

The political and cultural phenomena analyzed in this book have long been disregarded as marginal features of Russian life because they defy the modern world outlook. Before February 24, 2022, the belief in Putin's rationality and predictability was a key element in making Europe dependent on Russia's oil and gas. Numerous observers argued for two decades that Putin's politics represented Russian national interests.[1] Closely related to this view is the claim that the Kremlin's politics is not influenced by the Russian far right and its irrational ideas. In particular, the supporters of this trend have maintained that there is no proof that Putin reads far-right publications. Consequently, the argument goes, these extremists remain marginal inside Putin's "conservative" regime. Even the war against Ukraine has not entirely put those voices to rest.

Indeed, since consolidating his grip on power in 2000, Putin has cultivated the image of a predictable and rational politician that contrasts with that of "Yeltsin the alcoholic." The fear of nuclear terrorism after the collapse of the Soviet regime supported the wishful thinking that Putin was "a guarantor of stability" in the post-Soviet space. Despite the multiple signs of his links with St. Petersburg mafia gangs and the FSB's responsibility for the bombing of apartment blocks in Moscow in the fall of 1999, crimes committed by Putin's security services against hostages in Beslan and Nord-Ost, the horrors of the Second Chechen war that only prefigured more wars to follow,[2] and countless violations of human rights in Russia, refrains that Russia warrants "recognition" and its leader should be "respected" have long been popular in Western business, political, and cultural circles, as well as among the Russian public. Putin's expressions of his hatred of Ukraine and the West and his threats of a nuclear Armageddon were dismissed as

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ideological saber-rattling. Even the meddling in the 2016 American elections did not put Putinism beyond the pale.[3]

Putin's July 2021 article, in which he rejected the right of the Ukrainian state to exist and denied Ukrainians their national identity, took Western audiences by surprise.[4] Yet few in the West believed at the time that those bizarre statements were the run-up to an invasion. And when the Kremlin launched the war, the world was stupefied by the allegations of Russian propaganda that Ukrainians were Nazis, and that it was Russia's duty to "de-Nazify Ukraine" and rescue ethnic Russians from Ukrainian tyranny.[5] For Russians, though, this came as no surprise, because the Kremlin's politics of re-Stalinization, focused on the cult of the Soviet victory in World War II, had prepared them over two decades for a Putinist *reconquista* of a lost empire.

Before the war, it was not particularly common in Western media to label Putin's politics "medieval," though the term was occasionally used to ridicule his acts or to hint that something strange was going on in Russia.[6] But since the war began, stunned Western observers have repeatedly compared Russia's conduct of this war with medieval warfare. Titles such as "This is Russia's way of war. Putin has no qualm about medieval levels of brutality" have become commonplace in major media outlets.[7]

The utterly irrational character of this war has shocked geopolitical thinking in the twenty-first century and prompted powerful medieval associations.[8] What in a world of big data and global markets, of technological and economic co-operation and competition could motivate this medieval hunger for land? The reconstruction of the Russian/Soviet Empire has, however, been an integral part of neomedieval propaganda since the mid-2000s.

The Kremlin's allegations that the Ukrainians are in cahoots with the Devil also astounded the Western audience, to the point of raising doubts as to whether Russians can possibly give credit to such ideas.[9] But this mythologeme is an essential component of the neomedieval memory politics and eschatological thinking that promulgate it. It has been consistently promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church, various Orthodox sects, and many far-right activists whom the reader will meet on the pages of this book. Yuriev's utopia, *The Third Empire*, also spells out the main reason for Russia's animosity against the West: it is because Satan resides there, and the Russians are to vanquish him.[10] The statement of Patriarch Kirill (Vladimir Gundyaev, head of the Russian Orthodox Church from 2009 and allegedly a KGB agent)[11] that Russian soldiers who die in Ukraine will have their sins forgiven springs directly from this mindset.[12] Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's former president and the current Deputy Chair of the Security Council, rationalized the war to his compatriots in the same vein: "The goal is to stop the supreme ruler of hell, no matter what name he uses – Satan, Lucifer, or Iblis."[13] It took the war to begin building the awareness that Putin and the Kremlin could actually leverage such neomedieval phantasms. It is worth mentioning that Sergei Lavrov, Putin's foreign minister, told *The Financial Times* that he learned about Russia's aggression against Ukraine close to the event and

explained his ignorance by the fact that "Putin has only three advisors – Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great."[14]

There is in truth little evidence of what Putin and his clique read, know, and think. Putin's Kremlin is a "closed society," and only sparse information emerges from it. But we do know what these people finance, in whose honor they erect monuments, which books and films they sponsor, and so on. We can also compare the ideas formulated in those books and films with the regime's actual politics. Any conclusions we may arrive at on this basis remain hypotheses supported by indirect evidence. But the material gathered in this book suggests that political neomedievalism and re-Stalinization, its double, are an essential aspect of the Kremlin's and its proxies' propaganda.

The Kremlin's ideologists (for example, Vladimir Medinsky, Russian Federation Minister of Culture from 2012 to 2020, and currently an aide to the president) claim that "there is no 'absolute objectivity' in history."[15] Postmodernism has been intensively weaponized by the Kremlin, acting upon the belief that people are incapable of behaving as rational subjects: the more confusion, distortion, and contradictions they are exposed to, the easier it will be to manipulate them.[16] There are reasons to suppose that a considerable share of Russians have internalized this propaganda, and I attribute their support for the regime, in part, to its success. Like Anton Chekhov's dramatic principle that a gun hanging on the wall in the first act must be fired before the play's end, Putin's memory politics contributed substantially to rallying the Russian populace for war.

It is hard to say how many Russians back the war because opinion polls in totalitarian societies are unreliable on sensitive political issues. But had some sizable portion of the population not supported Putinism, it would not have been able to mobilize half a million conscripts for an absurd war that has already resulted in at least 200,000 Russian casualties. Yet we should harbor no illusions: the considerable public approval enjoyed by Putin's regime does not make it democratic, no more than enthusiastic public support magically transforms fascism into a democracy. This book therefore examines the causes of the extraordinary potency of the anti-modern and anti-democratic worldview in contemporary Russia, which is closely entwined with the country's fluctuating attitudes towards the West.

The Origins of Post-Soviet Political Neomedievalism in the Crisis of the Pro-Western Ideology

The rise of neomedievalism as a pivotal trend in post-Soviet memory politics should be understood in the broader context of the centuries-long intercultural dialogue between Russia and the West that evolved around the vision of humanity's future. While the Bakhtinian concept of dialogue is often interpreted as a free exchange of ideas, the distribution of roles between Russia and the West in this dialogue has proven relatively rigid and has demonstrated a remarkable continuity. This intercultural dialogue has obeyed its own internal

logic, triggering an intense sharing of cultural representations and stereotypes. Inside Russia, this dialogue translated into debates about the West's role in the country's history and culture and was foundational for Russia's national identity. The perception of the Russian Middle Ages hinged on Russia and the West's mutual idealizations and disillusionments, and Russia's disappointments with the West played a major role in its fascination with medieval Rus.

The West has led this dialogue since the reign of Peter I (1689–1725). Peter's transformations of traditional Russian society were modeled on the advanced European countries of the time, notably Holland, England, and Sweden. His reforms addressed all aspects of public life and culture, from state and church administration to adapting the mores of the Russian nobility to European standards, from educational and cultural reforms to modernization of the economy and army. But the reforms were implemented by tyrannical measures and were accompanied by a strengthening of autocracy and serfdom.[17] They deepened the cultural divide within Russian society by further contrasting the life and conduct of a tiny elite to those of the masses. Russia's illiterate peasantry remained enserfed until 1861 and entrenched in the traditions of pre-Petrine Rus well into the twentieth century. Serfdom lasted far longer in Russia and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe, where the personal dependence of peasants was basically abolished in the thirteenth century. In contrast to Western Europe, where the Middle Ages liberated the ancient Greco-Roman slave society by turning slaves into serfs, personally free though bound to the land – and who eventually evolved into a free peasantry and eventually even a merchant class – there was no Antiquity in Russian history. Yet Ancient Rus (the Russian "Middle Ages") had many different forms of slavery.[18] Russian serfdom began consolidating in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the peasants were fully enslaved under the "enlightened monarch" Catherine II (1762–1796). Selling people like cattle remained a common practice in Russia until 1861.

For generations, Russia's Westernizers held Western civilization, Western institutions, and, above all, Western liberalism in high esteem, and valued Peter I's reforms. For them, the West offered proof that a more humane society, freedom, and parliamentary forms of governance were possible. The Western example motivated Russian Westernizers to struggle against serfdom and the untrammeled tsarist autocracy. The Decembrist uprising (December 14, 1825) was inspired by the notion of reforming Russian society on a European model. The Decembrists planned to abolish serfdom and wanted to replace the autocracy with a constitutional monarchy or even a republic. But the uprising's defeat prevented their projects from materializing.[19]

After the suppression of the Decembrist revolt, Enlightenment ideas and, occasionally, French Utopian Socialism continued to inform the Westernizers' critique of the reactionary regime established by Nicholas I. The publication of Pyotr Chaadaev's *First Philosophical Letter* in 1836 set the agenda for debates between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles, for years to come.[20] Chaadaev considered Russia's backwardness and its isolation from Europe the source of

all its troubles and faulted Orthodoxy for having driven Russia further away from the West. In the Westernizer–Slavophile debates, which split Russian society from the late 1830s into the 1840s, the Slavophiles, swayed by the German Romantic notion of *Sonderweg* (Germany's distinct path of historical development), instead proclaimed Russia's uniqueness and its natural opposition to the West. Blaming Western secularism, sensualism, and rationalism for "the destruction of the soul's spiritual unity," they maintained that Russia should not imitate the West and ought instead to follow its own path. Some supported the sixteenth-century doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome, which sought to reclaim the Orthodox heritage of Byzantium. In the 1840s to the 1850s, Slavophiles Alexey Khomyakov and Ivan Kireevsky insisted that the Western model did not hold for Russia because of its unique ethos of spiritual community, the *sobornost'* that was founded on love of Church, state, and nation. In their view, the sobornost'-based co-operation within Russian peasant communities complemented the ideals of Orthodox Christianity and solved the problem of individualism, which they considered a major pitfall of Western society. From their perspective, pre-Petrine Rus had been a harmonious society based on a sacred unity between people and tsar, free from bureaucracy and corruption. Peter I's reforms had destroyed this idyll by introducing Western traditions and values.

Most Slavophiles were against imposing any limitations on the monarchy, but the abolition of serfdom was very present in their thinking. Several important representatives of the movement participated actively in preparing for the 1861 abolition of serfdom under Alexander II. Nothing could have been further from their minds than praise for Ivan the Terrible's *oprichnina*, which they regarded as a regime of senseless terror foisted on Russia by a tyrant who would have never made it onto their list of favorite historical figures. In his programmatic article, Khomyakov mentions "the wolf-headed Ivan" among the most shameful occurrences in Russian history.[21]

By the turn of the twentieth century, the traditional perception of the West as a model for Russia, which had, the Slavophiles notwithstanding, dominated Russian culture through the nineteenth century, gave way to a new self-image. Russian intellectuals and politicians began to see their country as the locus of the future. Vladimir Lenin considered Russia the weakest element of the imperialist world order and a natural place for a world revolution to begin.[22]

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 catalyzed the redistribution of cultural roles in the Russia –West dialogue. Despite the escalating animus in Soviet propaganda against the West, which opposed "the Soviet state of workers and peasants," and Western capitalism, the Bolsheviks still based their legitimacy on Marxism and did not perceive their Western ideology and their anti-Western politics to be a paradox. Yet Marxism also taught them that Western capitalism belonged to the historical past, and they saw themselves turning, once and for all, that page of human history. The Western left welcomed the revolution as opening a new era in human history.

The Bolsheviks treated the medieval heritage with a scorn typical of the Enlightenment. Russian medieval history, moreover, belonged to the "tsarist past," which the Bolsheviks disdained in its entirety. It was not until Stalin's nationalist turn in the mid-1930s that the Russian pre-revolutionary past re-emerged as a source of positive examples.[23] As we will see, Ivan the Terrible and his oprichnina played a prominent role in the Stalinist reappropriation of national history.

Forced to emigrate by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s, several Russian thinkers – Pyotr Savitsky, Nikolai Trubetskoy, and Lev Karsavin, among others – re-examined the West's importance for Russia. They explained the peculiarities of Russian history, state, and culture in terms of Russia's geographical position between Europe and Asia and emphasized the importance of Asia, rather than Europe, to Russia's destiny. The term "Eurasianism" originated in these debates.[24] For these thinkers, Bolshevism was merely the tragic result of the West's malignant influence on Russia. The Eurasian thinkers did believe in the leading role of the Orthodox Church in the future liberation of Russia from Bolshevism and in the uniqueness of the Russian national tradition. But although they encouraged at least some variety of "cultural nationalism," their leading figures rejected chauvinism, pan-Slavism, and what they called Russian "zoological self-determination."[25]

The dissatisfaction with the West and the hatred for Bolshevism reinforced the tendency of many Russian émigrés in the late 1920s and early 1930s to embrace the fascist ideology and sympathize with the political regimes in Italy and Germany. Some of them, like Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954), developed genuinely fascist theories. From Ilyin's viewpoint, fascism offered an alternative to the Soviets and was therefore the best solution for Russia.[26]

The double negation – of the West and Soviet communism – directed the Russian émigrés' search for a better future toward the Russian medieval past (as has also happened in Putin's Russia). Pyotr Krasnov (1869–1947), Cossack ataman, White Guard general, Nazi collaborator, and writer, and the religious philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev (1874–1948) explicitly advocated for a return to the Russian Middle Ages. The very mention of their names was taboo under the Soviets, but they were secretly idolized by Russian nationalists. Today, their writings resonate in the Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics, as does Ilyin's work, which Dugin allegedly introduced to Putin, who came to admire it, to the point of quoting Ilyin on several occasions and having his ashes transferred to Moscow.[27]

Pyotr Krasnov fought the Bolsheviks in the Don territory during the Civil War. After the defeat of the White Guard, he emigrated to Germany and was involved in the formation of the anti-Soviet Cossack units that served with the Nazi army during World War II. The British extradited him after the war, and the Soviets executed him in 1947. In his numerous publications, Krasnov expressed deep contempt for the West. To him, it was the source of the corruption that went by the name of communism. He directed his ire particularly at the Western democratic institutions of elections, representative government,

parliaments, and political parties. In his utopian novel *Behind the Thistle* (1922), Russia, separated from the West by an impenetrable wall of thistles, is ultimately cured of its Bolshevism by a return to its medieval traditions, including a society of estates and an autocratic monarchy.

Unlike Krasnov, Ilyin, and several other Russian emigrants, Berdyaev never embraced fascism. To present an alternative to Bolshevism, he wrote a pamphlet, *The New Middle Ages: Reflections on Russia's and Europe's Destiny* (1924). Following Nikolai Danilevskii (1822–1885), the author of the notorious ultra-nationalist and racist pamphlet *Russia and Europe* (1869),[28] that dubbed Europe Russia's primordial enemy, Berdyaev claimed that the Enlightenment project with its categories of progress, humanism, individuality, rationalism, parliamentarism, and legalism should be definitively shelved. Italian fascism and Russian communism were, Berdyaev wrote, clear manifestations of the crisis of the Enlightenment that signaled the end of democracy. Like many defenders of the Middle Ages before and after him, he declared that the Enlightenment had unjustifiably vilified that epoch. While acknowledging "all the negative dark sides of medieval society: barbarism, brutality, cruelty, violence, slavery, illiteracy and the absence of positive knowledge about nature and society, the religious terror," he held nevertheless that the Middle Ages exemplified an "unprecedented, intense spiritual search" in mysticism and philosophy, and praised it for the creation of "the new cultural character of monks and knights" and "the cult of the *Belle dame*" when "troubadours sang their songs."[29] The new Middle Ages, according to him, would be different primarily because these values had the potential to unite humanity in "a universal spiritual culture": all the negative features of the Middle Ages would ultimately be overcome and transformed in the search for the Kingdom of Christ. An Orthodox devotee, Berdyaev believed in Russia's messianic role. It possesses, he wrote, a "universal Christian spirit, thanks to which the Russian people's mission is to unite the world of the Christian cosmos."[30]

In Russia, meanwhile, the pre-revolutionary pro-Western ideology was largely destroyed by the Soviet regime. Western capitalist society was now seen to embody all imaginable and unimaginable evils, a vision that many in the West shared. During Stalin's Great Purges, left-wing Western intellectuals, aptly termed communist "fellow-travelers," threw their wholehearted support behind the USSR,[31] much as the *Putinversteher* do today. Praising Soviet communism as "humanity's last hope" and dismissing any accounts of the Bolshevik terror as a reactionary calumny, they trusted the Stalinist propaganda of Soviet triumphs. For François Furet, the Western intellectuals' romance with Stalinism was a manifestation of the West's self-hatred: both fascism and communism were rooted therein.[32] The Soviet victory in World War II only added to the international recognition of Stalinism. The unremitting cleansing of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia from "rotten bourgeois Western influences" culminated in the antisemitic campaign against so-called "cosmopolitanism" (1948–1953), thus eliciting anti-Western sentiments inside postwar Russia.

Stalin died in 1953, and Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech inaugurated a brief period of political liberalization – the Thaw. This period, which altered the distribution of roles in the Russia–West dialogue, was crucial to the formation of new attitudes to the West among the Soviet intelligentsia. According to the official Soviet doctrine, the intelligentsia was not a class like the workers and the peasants but a "social stratum." The new Soviet intelligentsia, which had replaced the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia in the repression-driven rotation of social groups, was still stigmatized by Soviet ideology as socially alien well into the 1960s (which did not prevent the co-optation of its members into the Soviet elite). This imposed marginality within Soviet society prompted the intelligentsia to look for a model of excellence beyond the Soviet regime. Two opposing political camps that resisted the Soviet ideology emerged from that conflict – the liberals and the nationalists. Both challenged the principal dogmas of Soviet propaganda yet were structurally dependent on it.[33]

The nationalists opposed Soviet "internationalism," which considered all national traditions, including Russia's, a thing of the past, and accused the Bolsheviks of aggressive atheism and of decimating the Orthodox Church.[34] The nationalists also blamed Lenin for betraying Russia's national interests in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (March 3, 1918). (In 2017, the centennial of the 1917 Revolution, this opinion was voiced by then-Minister of Culture Medinsky, who assessed the treaty as "a huge political and historical mistake made by the Bolsheviks that could even be called treason" and blamed the Bolsheviks for "putting their own interests above those of the state."[35]) Furthermore, the nationalists commiserated with the Romanov dynasty and the tsarist regime, and created a cult of the White Guard officers, whom they portrayed as a model of chauvinistic male superiority. (Paradoxically, many Communist Party and Komsomol officials were profoundly tolerant of that cult.[36]) Nationalists, who were often antisemitic, frequently insinuated that the October Revolution had been a Jewish conspiracy, accusing Jews of all the crimes and failures of the Soviet regime. Yet neither the antisemitic political movement Pamyat' ("Memory"), which was created in the 1980s and was especially active in the 1990s, nor even the "village prose" trend in Soviet literature, which exposed the destruction of the Russian peasantry by Soviet collectivization and waxed nostalgic for traditional peasant values, went so far as to publicize the medieval past as Russia's desirable future.

The liberal narrative blamed all the faults of the Soviet system on the end of Westernization in 1917. For the liberal intelligentsia, the dissident movement turned the West, concealed behind an iron curtain, into the ultimate moral judge. The Soviet maxim of intractable opposition between the Soviet system and Western capitalism was converted, by and large, into a causal relation, and all the pitfalls of Soviet socialism were explained by the "deviation from the mainstream of human history" in 1917. If Russia were only to join "the rest of the civilized world," its problems would be solved. The willingness of the Soviet liberal intelligentsia to identify with the West as a domain of freedom,

justice, and well-being grew even stronger in the 1970s,[37] boosted by Soviet propaganda's ill-designed attempts to represent Western society as irremediably evil.

At the same time, the Western disillusionment with the Soviet regime and disappointment with the Soviet economic model that had not fulfilled its promise of overcoming the capitalist system turned the USSR, "the country of the future," into a deviation from the "true Marxism." "The Solzhenitsyn Effect" – the translation of *The GULAG Archipelago* into French and English in 1974 – ended the Western intellectuals' romance with Soviet Russia. Humanity's Last Hope became instead an Evil Empire in Ronald Reagan's speech in 1983.

By the end of the 1980s, the values of the Soviet Western-oriented intelligentsia were shared by most of Soviet society. At that time, Western society was perceived not only as an economically, technologically, and socially advanced consumer paradise but also as morally and aesthetically perfect. This idealization of the West gained the power of a new ideology,[38] which professed to show Soviet society the way out of the dead end of the Soviet regime. It motivated Gorbachev's perestroika and the democratic movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and inspired the masses who resisted the communists' August putsch in 1991. During the market reforms of the early 1990s, Yeltsin's government clearly positioned the West as a model for Russia's economic and political development.

The persuasive power of this new ideology rested on two fundamental certainties of Western-oriented Russian intellectuals. First, in agreement with the economic determinism they had inherited from Marxism and in step with Western economic theorists, they assumed that a market economy would endow Russia with democracy. Paradoxically, the second important assumption was the denial of historical responsibility for the crimes of the Soviet regime.

During Gorbachev's *glasnost'*, Russian democrats used the history of Soviet crimes to bring the Soviet regime into disrepute. Fights over "the truth about Soviet history" formed the very core of Russian politics in the late 1980s. However, unlike the situation in Germany,[39] a sense of historical responsibility was not primarily responsible for this acute interest in the history of Soviet crimes. While some democratically minded intellectuals were calling on their compatriots to ponder the meaning of Stalinism and collaboration with the Soviet regime, most Russians chose to identify themselves with the victims rather than the perpetrators of Soviet crimes – if, of course, they condemned those crimes at all.

After the fall of the Soviet regime in 1991, the debates about the Soviet past quickly lost their political significance and were promptly replaced by the political struggle over the choice of a market economy versus a "socially oriented" command economy. In the early 1990s, the liberal democrats' unwillingness to reflect upon their own collaboration with the Soviet system resulted in a symbolic denial of the Soviet past. In the famous dictum of the time, the Soviet regime was transformed into "a gap in the flow of time." The perception of the Soviet past in the guise of a temporal gap enabled Russian democrats to equate Russia's troublesome present with the historical past of the West. Russia was

now "the United States" – or, more specifically, "Chicago" – in "the early twenties" and a country "on the eve of capitalism."[40] The flow of history that had been interrupted in 1917 was to restart in 1991.

The assumption that Russia had only to follow the path of Western society by "repeating the lessons of history" imparted credibility to the reforms proposed by the Yeltsin government. To attain the Western state of perfection, Russia had simply to "come back into the mainstream of history," "return to humanity," and "leave in the past everything that made Russia a cultural ghetto."[41]

Eradication of the Soviet past was extremely important to the coherence of the pro-Western ideology. The deep faith in societal progress shared by Russian democrats such as Yegor Gaidar, the noted economist and acting prime minister in Yeltsin's government in 1992, guaranteed Russia a safe ride to democracy. But if doubt were to be cast on the idea that history charts the way from a somber past to a radiant future or that societal progress is a universal law of history, Russia's chances of a smooth journey to an ideal Western future would be threatened. The criminal Soviet past that challenged the idea of social progress had to disappear in a bout of deliberate national amnesia so that Russia could become a "normal country."

The rupture caused by the exclusion of the Soviet past from the flow of historical time profoundly influenced the mentality of the post-Soviet Westernizers and their perception of Russia's present. The very word "present" almost disappeared from the pro-Western discourse in the early 1990s, to be entirely replaced, in the mass media and in everyday speech, by the expression "the period of transition." The very use of the term indicated an eagerness to arrive with all possible speed at the desirable future exemplified by the idealized West.[42]

The "postmodern" temporality dissipated the Russians' sense of reality and revealed itself to them not as a philosophical problem but as part of their daily experience. In their discourse in the 1990s, the "real, true, objective" reality existed in the idealized West, while life in Russia was usually characterized as "unreal," "irrational," and "abnormal." Attempts to reproduce the ideal image of the West and the consistent failure of those efforts retriggered the pre-existing inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West, and created the psychological and intellectual conditions for the pro-Western ideology's decay.[43]

Unfortunately, Russia had caught up with the idea of imitating the West just as liberal democracy was entering a phase of profound crisis and was now being perceived across the world as just one, and not necessarily the best, form of modernity. This coincided with a change in the perception of historical time, the "crisis of the future," and the decay of the master narratives, which came to characterize the cultural climate in the West. The disappointment with the Western model – or, rather, with Russia's capacity to attain it painlessly – was seized upon by the nationalist currents of Russian politics that had been temporarily marginalized by the triumph of the pro-Western ideology in the late 1980s.

In a few years, while hopes for Western investment in and support of the Russian market economy faded, oil prices hit a historical low, and Gaidar's

economic policy of "shock therapy" ruined the well-being of millions, the consensus dramatically shifted from a peaceful imitation of the West to a new phase of its repudiation. The Chechen war (1994–1996) created a context favorable to the resumption of power by the KGB (renamed the FSB in 1995). Putin's appointment as acting president in 1999 sounded the death knell of the Western-oriented ideology. The accumulated disbelief in societal progress and a future-oriented ideology at the turn of the millennium prompted the search for social and political models in the Russian past, and predisposed Russians to a positive reception of the neomedieval agenda. The acute crisis of the future experienced by Russia, aggravated by the collapse of the Marxist ideology and the crisis of the pro-Western ideology, conditioned the rise of the far-right movement and ensured it a conspicuous place in Russian politics.

The current phase in the Russia–West intercultural dialogue is marked by the prevailing anti-Western sentiments in Russia, and this new wave of anti-Western mobilization is both unique and multivalent, especially because it resonates strongly in Western self-criticism. The waning attractiveness of democracy as the world's future has hardened the crisis of pro-Western ideology in Russia and boosted the significance of political neomedievalism, which is currently being used by the Kremlin to push Russia ever closer to war with the West.

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The role that the collapse of the pro-Western ideology played in conditioning the development of neomedieval memory politics in Russia provides a necessary background to explain the argument and the composition of this book. Chapter 1 introduces the concepts of *political neomedievalism, the memory of the perpetrators*, and *mobmemory* to analyze the formation and functioning of the right-wing populist memory that is now prevalent in Putin's Russia. *Political neomedievalism* is defined as a memory politics that capitalizes on the current crisis of the future and on the belief that history can be repeated. The global spread of political neomedievalism does not mean that the world is "going medieval." It is, rather, a propaganda instrument that legitimizes existing social inequalities and normalizes terror as a way of governance. Political neomedievalism thrives under a new memory regime – *the memory of the perpetrators*, which marginalizes the victims and exalts the perpetrators, ousting the humanistic cosmopolitan memory. The memory of the perpetrators generates an artificial memory – *mobmemory* – that endorses and celebrates past atrocities. This concept helps identify the imprint of state propaganda, political and religious movements, academia, and popular culture on the formation of artificial memory. The chapter reviews Russian and Western theories about the return of the Middle Ages and considers their role in the ascendancy of political neomedievalism, in Russia and beyond.

Chapter 2 documents post-Soviet neomedieval memory politics, which glorifies the Russian medieval past and its warlords. Disseminated by the Kremlin and its far-right proxies, political neomedievalism employs a variety of methods and agents to engage its Russian audiences. This chapter surveys state and

grassroots initiatives, laws, monuments, museums, popular films and fiction dedicated to Ivan the Terrible, Alexander Nevsky, Prince Vladimir of Kyiv, and Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversky, and a number of pamphlets. These pamphlets, written to influence Putin's domestic politics, position Russia's return to the Middle Ages as Russia's political goal. The chapter analyzes the social programs that advocate for the restoration of the society of estates because the pamphlets' authors consider this social change imperative for the reconstruction of the Russian Empire. The resemblance between state-supported neomedieval memory politics and these far-right pamphlets demonstrates the depth of Russia's engagement with antidemocratic thinking, as well as the level of political influence wielded by the Russian far right on the Kremlin's propaganda. This analysis exposes the devices of memory manipulation employed in fabricating the memory of the perpetrators and mobmemory.

Chapter 3 explores the mutual influences among the Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox sects, and the post-Soviet historiography of the oprichnina, the first instance of Russian state terror, established by Ivan the Terrible from 1565 to 1572. It begins by scrutinizing the doctrine of *tsarebozhie* developed by Ivan Snychov (Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga from 1990 to 1995), its advocacy of the oprichnina as the best form of Russian governance, and its proposals to recreate the social structures of medieval Rus. This analysis is followed by a review of the *mystical turn* in post-Soviet historiography – a shift in interpretations of the oprichnina under the influence of tsarebozhie and Stalinist historical perspectives. The proponents of this turn emphasize the religious motives that guided Ivan the Terrible in unleashing the oprichnina and the role that the Orthodox faith of the historical actors of that time played in implementing the terror. This chapter suggests that sectarian and historiographical views of the oprichnina are interconnected and have become an important resource for the Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics.

Chapter 4 examines proposals for introducing and implementing the new oprichnina – state terror – in Putin's Russia. It discusses various concepts of the new oprichnina advanced by far-right activists and demonstrates that the Russian far right considers the new oprichnina not a temporary measure but the essence of the new social structure necessary to rebuild the Russian Empire. Using the mystical turn in post-Soviet historiography as their academic backing and with the support of various pro-Kremlin media, these projects have helped normalize the rule of terror for Russian audiences. The chapter concludes by surveying the neo-oprichnina communities that are implementing these ideas in their daily lives.

Chapter 5 investigates neomedieval memory politics as reflected in post-Soviet fiction and films featuring the oprichnina. While popular culture plays a crucial role in reshaping the memory of the oprichnina into mobmemory, it is also an arena where mobmemory may be challenged. The intertextual dialogue between supporters and adversaries of the oprichnina encompasses, among others, Mikhail Yuriev's *The Third Empire: Russia As It Ought to Be* (2006), Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006), Maxim Kononenko's *Day of*

the High Achiever (2008), Alexander Prokhanov's *A Symphony of the Fifth Empire* (2007), and several films. The public debates and political activism triggered by these works have prompted the polarization of public opinion and leveraged the celebrity culture, a prime mechanism of mobmemory formation. Exploring the changing attitudes to slavery in post-Soviet neomedieval cultural products, the chapter demonstrates that, the political stances of their creators notwithstanding, all those novels and films envisage state terror and inherited social inequalities, including slavery, as unavoidable aspects of the Russian future.

In Chapter 6, re-Stalinization – Putin's memory politics of whitewashing Stalin and his regime by pandering to the cult of the victory in World War II – is used to contextualize the rise of political neomedievalism in Russia. Like neomedieval memory politics, re-Stalinization is conducted through state and grassroots initiatives, legislation, the production of popular films, TV series, and works of fiction, monuments, the opening of pro-Kremlin memorials, museums, and institutions and the closing of institutions famous for their human rights activism, such as Perm-36 and the International Memorial Society. An overview of these activities under Putin reveals a structural resemblance between re-Stalinization and political neomedievalism. It demonstrates that the tradition of collocating the oprichnina and Stalinism has facilitated the Kremlin's merger of the two. An examination of the actions of the Wagner Group (a private army that has regenerated the Stalinist practices of terror in Ukraine) reinforces the conclusion that re-Stalinization and political neomedievalism advance the same values and social and political goals. They historicize state terror and present it as Russia's heritage.

In Chapter 7, Vladimir Sharov's novel on Stalinism, *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* (2018), lays bare the inner workings of the post-Soviet memory. This chapter opens with a comparison between *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* and Jonathan Littell's 2006 novel about the Holocaust, *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*). Littell's controversial novel initiated the "era of the perpetrators" – a shift of attention from the victim's experiences to those of the perpetrator – while *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* epitomizes the fabrication of the post-Soviet memory of the perpetrators. Searching for the meaning of Russian history, Sharov's protagonists reiterate the understanding of terror expressed in their creator's historical writings, where the torments and deaths of the innocent are a collective religious sacrifice for "Holy Russia" that offers the living a chance for salvation. This "secret knowledge" of the hidden workings of history is arguably essential to the functioning of the post-Soviet mobmemory. The chapter closes by addressing an alternative strategy for dealing with memories of Stalinism in Dmitry Bykov's novel *Justification* (2001).

The Conclusion discusses the vision of history inherent in Russian far-right doctrines and the impact of eschatology on Putinism. Disputing the notion that post-Soviet Russia is a reiteration of either fascism or the Soviet system, it defines Putinism as a repressive regime of a new type, which is spreading modern slavery

and corruption through Russia's everyday life. Disseminating the memory of the perpetrators and reconfiguring memories of state terror into mobmemory, Putinism replaces its lack of ideology with these new ways of legitimizing social inequalities and the escalation of repressions. The eschatological expectations that instruct Putin's rhetoric of nuclear blackmail are also prominent among Russian writers, far-right activists, Orthodox clergy, and sectarians, whose "pragmatic eschatology" feeds into the crusade for rebuilding the Russian Empire – the Third Rome. Russia's belief in the Apocalypse finds a parallel in the popularity of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres in Western secular culture and the conspicuous critique of humanism promoted by various political, religious, and philosophical teachings. The contemporary fascination with the end of humanity – the ultimate hallmark of the neomedieval mindset and a manifestation of the crisis of the future – discloses a crucial dimension in the global crisis of democracy.

Notes

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1

POLITICAL NEOMEDIEVALISM, THE MEMORY OF THE PERPETRATORS, AND MOBMEMORY

Political Neomedievalism and Memory Politics

The representations of the Middle Ages that are in vogue in Russia and in the US are shaped by amalgams of ideas. The current lure of "all things medieval" engages notions that often have no exact referents in medieval history – or in the history of those countries – but are brought together on the grounds of values and associations. The relation of both countries to medieval history proves highly problematic. The concept of the Middle Ages refers to the period in European history from the end of Antiquity to the Renaissance. The United States did not, strictly speaking, have a Middle Ages at all. Russia too experienced neither Antiquity nor the Renaissance. Since the eighteenth century, the pre-Petrine epoch in Russian history has been most often called Ancient Rus and subdivided into the Kievan (ninth to mid-thirteenth centuries) and Muscovite (mid-thirteenth to seventeenth centuries) eras.[1]

The Western concept of the Middle Ages became widely known in Russia due to Timofey Granovsky (1813–1855), a disciple of Leopold von Ranke and Carl Ritter and a professor at Moscow University. An influential Westernizer, Granovsky wrote and lectured on European rather than Russian history. Yet his terminology also impacted the Slavophiles, who could never think about Russia without comparing it to the West. Mikhail Pogodin, a well-known historian, and an editor of the Slavophile journal *Moskovitianin*, defined the Russian "Middle Age" (in the singular) thus in 1845:

> As in Western Europe, [...] we also had a Middle Age but of a different form; it was the same process that addressed the same tasks, used the same methods, and achieved the same goals but by different means.[2]

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The development of economic and social history in the late nineteenth century and the growing influence of Marxism contributed to the further "medievalization" of Ancient Rus. Indeed, the tendency to interpret the Middle Ages as a time of feudalism made it easier to call Ancient Rus "medieval." After all, Ancient Rus was an agrarian society dominated by a landed aristocracy that used unfree peasant labor. Historian Nikolai Pavlov-Silvansky imprinted the concept of feudalism onto Russia in his *Feudalism in Ancient Rus* (1907). The prevalent tendency in Russian and Soviet historiography was to rely on the concept of feudalism to describe the economic and social condition of Ancient Rus, as well as feudal fragmentation, and typically to categorize Ancient Rus as the Russian Middle Ages. After the fall of communism, the Russian Middle Ages and Ancient Rus appear in Russian historiography as synonyms, often without reservation or explanation.

The post-Soviet far right's choice of the concept of the New Middle Ages (*novoe srednevekov'e*) – and not, say, "the New Ancient Rus" or "the New Muscovite Rus" – as their watchword positions their project as an ambitious "world-historical" vision rather than a local antiquarian aspiration. It also shows that, despite their hostility to "everything Western," Russian nationalists cannot do without Western concepts.

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To account for the fascination with the Middle Ages in the West, which goes back to Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill (1747), and that now makes the European Middle Ages "a recurrent motif" even in Japan,[3] two terms – *medievalism* and *neomedievalism* – compete for popularity in academia.[4] Today, both medievalism and neomedievalism are established academic fields, but the boundaries between them remain unclear. Some see a mixture of scientific knowledge about the past and a nostalgia for the Middle Ages as defining features of medievalism compared to the traditional historical studies of this period.[5] Others include the fantastic in the domain of medievalism,[6] which may be regarded as encroaching on the territory of neomedievalism. But David Matthews' diagnosis – "[A p]aralyzing lack of self-definition [...] currently afflicts medievalism" – still holds true.[7]

Unlike medievalism, a term coined by John Ruskin (1819–1900), neomedievalism does not boast a noble genealogy. The obscure origins of the concept are lost in the intellectual history of the late nineteenth century. But, although neither the term nor the field existed before the late 1960s, neomedievalism is now expanding "faster than perhaps any other area of academia."[8] Usually, those who deem that neomedievalism "cannot be fully contained within 'medievalism'" emphasize the plurality of its manifestations.[9] Yet, just like medievalism, neomedievalism "resists definition."[10]

My approach to neomedievalism builds on Umberto Eco's interpretation of the *nuovo medioevo* as an expression of antimodernism in the cultural sphere and political life. Eco accentuates the role of the fictional Middle Ages in disseminating anti-democratic social practices typical of the late twentieth century

and links the proliferation of neomedievalism to the escalating popularity of fantasy as a genre. The wave of "neomedieval interest," he continues, emerges "midway between Nazi nostalgia and occultism."[11] Eco acknowledges the importance of the progress accomplished during the Middle Ages that prepared for the birth of modernity. Yet he takes a generally dim view of the nostalgia for the Middle Ages and calls it "pervasive" because neomedieval images typically have little to do with the actual historical period. He points to the striking anti-democratic tendencies in current politics that superficially resemble the stereotypical representations of the Middle Ages.[12] The lure of the Middle Ages acquires, according to him, a political meaning that signals a repudiation of democratic institutions: "These ages are Dark *par excellence*. [...] One is asked to celebrate [...] brute force."[13] He speaks of a "fantastic neomedievalism" the crucial features of which are the sunset of reason resulting in occultism, eschatological sentiments, and a "neo-Fascist will for power."[14] This emphasis on the decisive role of popular culture in the production and dissemination of neomedievalism and on its interconnection with far-right ideologies is vital to my approach.[15]

Since Eco made his observations, neomedievalism has developed in a significantly new context where the "old" forms of far-right politics receded into the past and right-wing populism appeared in its stead. Indeed, both medievalism and neomedievalism are fraught with an ideological co-option of medieval allusions by the far right that echoes their enthusiastic appropriation by fascism. This tendency has become so prevalent in the West in recent decades that some scholars even speak of "bad medievalism" or "dangerous medievalisms."[16]

The question of whether conservative political analogies with the Middle Ages reflect the true nature of medieval society is understandably troubling to historians. Some seek to demystify the "inappropriate appropriations" of the medieval past. For example, Bruce Holsinger views his mission as one of rectifying the abuse of analogies with the Middle Ages. David Matthews concurs: "The extreme right persistently appropriates medieval symbols, and it is important to [resist] such historical hijacking."[17] Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant point out cases of "good," inclusive, "progressive neomedieval spaces that welcome all players."[18] Focusing primarily on allusions to medieval racial and gender inequality in far-right propaganda, they ask: "What draws racists so strongly to the medieval past? In part, this is due to the myth that the Middle Ages was a predominantly white culture."[19] They have collected ample material to demonstrate that this epoch was neither downright racist nor totally gender-intolerant, yet they overlook other crucial aspects of the Middle Ages – a rigid hierarchy of estates, political and personal unfreedom, and religious dictate – that make this historical period so appealing to far-right populists.[20]

Indeed, the Middle Ages has never been in the middle of anything politically, and medieval references are typically apt to evoke certain values and reject others. While the use of the concept varies greatly across different epochs and cultures, one thing remains constant: this period has little potential to stimulate

advocacy for democracy, which emerged from a struggle against medieval traditions. On the contrary, the social realities and the memories of the Middle Ages have provided fertile soil for anti-democratic interpretations.

To circumvent far-right political allusions, some scholars insist that neomedievalism is "best understood as an aesthetic category" and accentuate the influence of postmodernism on neomedieval narratives.[21] Proponents of this approach stress the similarities between the postmodern and the neomedieval treatments of history and assert that neomedievalism "lacks the nostalgia of earlier medievalism in that it denies history."[22] Postmodern irony and its droll aesthetics are viewed as a source of neomedievalism's playful and ironic aspects, its disregard for history, and its lack of romantic nostalgia for the medieval past.[23] Still, it is hardly possible to argue that in the current cultural and political context, indulgence in medieval aesthetics is not apt to incur political consequences.

There is yet another aspect of the neomedieval aesthetic: neomedieval narratives are populated by monsters and pervaded by a fascination with death and violence.[24] In the Gothic, horror, and the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres, inhabited as they are by neomedievalism, readers and viewers are primed to see the fictional world through the monsters' eyes, empathizing and identifying with them rather than with their victims. But the reasons for this concurrence have remained largely unexplored.

The theory of commodified anti-humanism that I have developed in previous works offers a new perspective on the prominence of violence in present-day popular culture.[25] I argue that the radical critique of humanism and the rejection of anthropocentrism in popular culture, academia, and several movements – animal rights, transhumanism, posthumanism, and radical ecologism – have sanctioned the transformation of anti-humanism into a new commercial fad and a sought-after entertainment.[26] Homicidal monsters – vampires, serial killers, zombies – have replaced humans as trending cultural heroes. This shift explains the escalating celebrity of the image of the perpetrator in Western popular culture, which extends even to the Nazis, who may well have been history's monsters par excellence.[27] Current Russian representations of the perpetrators of Stalin's repressions and medieval state terror slot neatly into these wider tendencies.

The popularity of neomedievalism may be related to this fascination with death, monsters, and atrocities. Depicting imaginary societies dominated by violence and terror, neomedieval narratives build upon the memories of historical brutalities both ancient and recent. Commodified anti-humanism dictates how these instances of terror are represented, and provides an especially favorable environment in which to observe and even relish the inhumane treatment of fellow human beings.

I use the term *political neomedievalism* to denote a trend in far-right populist memory politics that surfaced in the 1990s. In its multiple incarnations, political neomedievalism reduces the Middle Ages to a system of values that radically challenges the principles of liberal democracy and the legacy of Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment.[28] Contrary to the Renaissance humanists who invented the notion of the Middle Ages to refer to the period of cultural

decay after the end of Antiquity, and to the Enlightenment philosophers, horrified by the brutalities and ignorance of medieval warlords and monks, political neomedievalism encourages admiration of the new "Dark Ages."

Neomedieval memory politics presupposes a model of history significantly distinct from the ancient and medieval *Historia Magistra Vitae* ("History as life's teacher"), which approached historical events as moral examples. It also differs from modern master narratives and political ideologies, which organized historical events according to certain abstract principles to be realized in the future. In the case of political neomedievalism, discrete historical events are brought together and endowed with meaning by the promise of a return to a quasi-religious, syncretic unity of the people and their leaders in a patriarchal society. Rendering the language of traditional politics redundant, neomedieval memory politics substitutes ideology as a system of abstract principles and doctrines with an *ad hoc* collection of fabricated examples from an ersatz past. While strongly resembling some aspects of the fascist ideology, this memory politics differs from both fascism and communism in that it knows no abstract doctrines and accommodates no aspects of modernism. Not a "foreign country"[29] but a political wonderland, the medieval past becomes a reservoir of discrete historical incidents that are enlisted to serve concrete political goals. The post-Soviet case demonstrates especially clearly that history politics has replaced traditional future-oriented ideologies, substituting more abstract theoretical discourses with decontextualized and misconstrued historical events. Their reenactment in the present – like Putin's reprise of "the Great Patriotic War" in Ukraine – showcases the absence of a project for the future.

Neomedievalism and the Broken Time of History

Neomedievalism owes its popularity not least to the new form of temporality that acquired prominence on the cusp of the second millennium. The proliferation of concepts with the prefix "post" – postmodern, post-structural, post-colonial, post-communist, post-Soviet, post-politics, and post-democracy – articulated the impression of a rupture with an old epoch and the coming of a new one or, as Fredric Jameson put it, "the sense of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class)."[30] Writing in 1984, Jameson thought that these terms characterized the postmodern condition. Today, however, it has become clear that the "post" component primarily signifies our failure to define the "newness" of the phenomena in question.

One may argue that a whole series of concepts with the prefixes "new" and "neo" – neomedievalism, neoliberalism, neocolonialism, neoconservatism, neofascism, new feudalism, and so on – do a better job of explaining today's realities. However, despite their veneer of novelty, their core meaning is clearly fixated on the past and is bound to concepts that describe past phenomena. More than anything else, these concepts communicate a sense of uncertainty about the present and the opaqueness of the future. Among them, neomedievalism best discloses the crisis in the perception of historical time.

While the origins of this crisis may be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* played an important role in articulating and promoting new approaches to the historical time. Foucault defines rupture as the central historical event, so that past, present, and future lose their meaning.[31] The notion of rupture, which came to replace that of the linearity and irreversibility of history, was French Theory's main contribution to a new perception of time, which postmodernism largely embraced: unknown catastrophes looming on the horizon distort the vision of the future, and the terrifying yet uncertain past overshadows the all-embracing present. This perception of history excludes teleological interpretation, which was an important reason for rejecting history-based master narratives.

It was probably not by chance that medieval (as well as early modern) studies introduced into historical discourse the plurality of historical time, in parallel with French Theory. Fernand Braudel's notion of "*longue*," "*moyenne*," and "*courte durées*" oriented Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie toward a theory of "histoire immobile."[32] Jacques Le Goff, another *Annales* school historian, claimed that:

> The principal conceptual and methodological innovation in recent historical thought has been the replacement of a uniform, linear, objective and mathematically divisible notion of time by a complex, reversible, and subjective concept, which is more qualitative than quantitative. The notion of time itself has often been replaced by the more malleable concept of duration (*durée*).[33]

The new theories of time became particularly popular in the late 1970s, when relativity theory and quantum physics entered the secondary school curriculum.[34] The validity of each observer's own "psychological" time became accepted as a scientifically proven concept, undermining the vision of time as external, abstract, universal, and linear.[35] From the 1980s on, the analyses of different temporalities flourished in the social sciences. The view of time as a product of social, historical, or cultural contexts engendered research on the temporalities of economic cycles and labor, sport and painting, the body and decolonization.[36] By formulating a strategy of "time quantization," this anthropological reduction of time weakened the prevailing nineteenth-century belief in the existence of an objective time independent of its observers. Memory studies have also taken up assertions of the synchronicity and reversibility of time, as well as its free oscillation between past, present, and future.[37]

The proliferation of these approaches suggested to scholars the notion of the deep change in the perception of historical time that characterizes our own epoch.[38] Hence, François Hartog in *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* discusses the present crisis of the future that defines our current perception of time.[39] In his *Régimes d'historicité*, Hartog diagnoses the emerging of a new temporal regime and termed it "presentism." He calls the present "eternal" and "quasi-immobile": "We are gazing backward and forward, but we cannot find a

way out of the present that we have turned into our ultimate horizon."[40] According to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, the present occupies "all the time," at the expense of past and future.[41] Several scholars have emphasized the interconnections between these changes in the perception of historical time, the long-term political transformations of modern societies, and their effects on democracy.[42]

The connection between the temporal crisis[43] and neomedievalism can be further addressed through Reinhart Koselleck's history of concepts, a now-classic approach that links concept formation to the perception of historical time.[44] According to Koselleck, the new system of basic social and political concepts emerged in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe due to a radical change: the creation of the theory of progress based on a new futurist temporality. Koselleck calls this period *Sattelzeit* (literally, "saddle period" or time of transformation).[45] A radical rupture between the new "horizon of expectations" and the traditional "space of experience" had produced historical concepts charged with a progressive, forward-looking vision of historical time. Applying the Koselleckian approach to the concept of medievalism, Richard Utz claims that medievalism belongs among concepts that "contained the realization of their non-contiguous pastness on the one hand and their shifting, perhaps future-oriented temporal boundaries on the other."[46] Utz's argument allows for elaboration on the differences between medievalism and neomedievalism, not least because the concept of neomedievalism lacks even the feeble future-oriented potential that medievalism may claim.

Neomedievalism reflects the current change in the perception of historical time and highlights the rupture in, and the reversibility of, time, which may have caused its rapid spread in popular culture and academia. In a neomedieval movie, novel, or political pamphlet, the emphasis is less on a choice between cyclical or linear time, as researchers sometimes suppose,[47] than on a rupture that, occurring at any given moment, can interrupt the flow of time and reinstall the historical past. Indeed, scholars concur that neomedieval narratives are essentially fragmented and their temporal continuity is alterable at will by a creator or narrator.[48] The notion of history's eventual backward movement makes the neomedieval rejection of historical progress its greatest claim to fame. Neomedievalism turns anti-modernism into history's only possible horizon. This specific historical temporality explains the popularity of apocalyptic thinking and the apocalyptic genre among the adepts of neomedievalism: the backward flow of time is apt to entail death and destruction.[49] Unlike after the Christian Apocalypse, nothing positive follows this total annihilation. This teleological temporal model is neither linear nor forward-looking.

The prominence of scientific theories and political prophesies that the Middle Ages are about to return only adds credence to this vision of time, and points to a search for a social model in the past. Whether critical or enthusiastic about the New Middle Ages, these theories reveal a disillusionment with objectivity, with the irreversibility of historical time, and with the theory of progress.

Can the Middle Ages Come Back?

The retrograde temporality of neo-concepts impacts theories that seek to explain what their authors consider antimodern or premodern aspects of contemporary society. The fact that some features of the present, in Russia and elsewhere, might well be described as reminiscent of social structures of the medieval period has led many scholars to speak of a return to the medieval past and couch it as an explanation for contemporary political, social, and economic conditions. Some even believe that such a return is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. Hedley Bull, an English political scientist, claimed in 1977 that the coming of a new medievalism, which he viewed as an alternative to the state monopoly on power, would assure a better future for the world. Unlike Eco, who was highly suspicious of neomedievalism's social and political consequences, Bull saw it as a positive trend.[50] Bull's followers acknowledge having found an analogy for their take on the Middle Ages in fantasy and science fiction.[51] "Back to future" is how Steven Kobrin, one of the proponents of this theory, summarizes this view.[52]

Some academics rejoice in the positive aspects of retrograde political projects such as the neomedieval empire, a notion that is especially haunting in the current political climate. Jan Zielonka, for instance, has suggested that:

> A neo-medieval empire might even be in a good position to be seen as democratically legitimate by bringing governance structures closer to the citizens, and making the system more transparent and open.[53]

Even scholars alarmed by the prospects of a comeback for the Middle Ages consider the medieval revival a new political reality. According to Alain Minc, "the inability to discover a new foundational principle in the post-communist world brings us back to a Middle Ages of some sort."[54] The prominent postmodernist Slavoj Žižek, who could be expected to exult in the idea of "enlightenment values declining," voices concerns about a "looming New Dark Age."[55]

Musings on the reoccurrence of the Middle Ages are often triggered by superficial similarities between medieval institutions and contemporary practices. Thus, Frank Ankersmit condemns the privatization of state functions, which he considers a return of the Middle Ages.[56] Ulrich Beck points to the undermining of "enlightened scientific claims" by a "feudalization of scientific knowledge practice."[57] Sean McFate denounces the return of feudalism manifested in the development of private armies.[58] Like Bull, he believes that the world is heading back to the Middle Ages, "a non-state-centric and multipolar world order characterized by overlapping authorities and allegiances."[59] Joel Kotkin claims that neo-feudalism poses a threat to democracy and that the accumulation of wealth in the high-tech economy leads to modern serfdom (he actually calls the working class "the New Serfs").[60] His concept is reminiscent of digital feudalism, in that the ruling elite or the First Estate – Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft – is served by the Second Estate – university professors, scientists, public intellectuals, etc., who

legitimize the "new world order" to the detriment of ordinary citizens. Kotkin is justified in calling attention to those current social changes that he believes are rooted in and conducive to growing economic inequality.[61] However, economic conditions only partially explain the new forms of personal dependence. The infringements on individual freedom are no less impacted by changing ways of thinking about society.

Some scholars in Russian Studies also interpret the post-Soviet realities as a return to the Middle Ages. Researchers critical of those practices suggest that post-communist Russia has turned its back on democracy and a market economy and is heading toward feudalism rather than to democracy and a market economy.[62] Grounding his approach in the Marxist theory of social formations, sociologist Vladimir Shlyapentokh maintains that social formations such as capitalism and feudalism can "coexist," and that their "coexistence" explains the peculiarities of post-Soviet Russia.[63] His viewpoint has won many supporters in Russia who believe that Russia "is now halfway between the autocracy of Ivan III and the post-industrial period."[64]

Similar opinions are widespread among economists. Thus, Richard Ericson explains the idiosyncrasies of Russia's economy under Boris Yeltsin by the persistence of some remnants of feudalism. He, however, favors the Western path to capitalism for Russia's economic development and believes that by passing through a Western-style Middle Ages, Russia may eventually create a functional modern market economy.[65] Andreas Åslund has also asserted that post-Soviet society is characterized by "neofeudal capitalism"[66] and argues that the oligarchical structure of Russia's "crony capitalism" is guided by the Putin administration's conscious attempts to reintroduce the feudal system of Ancient Rus in the Russian Federation.

In Russia, public critics of Putinism often compare Putin's cronies to feudal lords, post-Soviet governors to a feudal monarch's vassals, etc.[67] Maintaining that "contemporary Russia is a society of estates, reminiscent of a late feudal society" readily invites the conclusion that "we are already living in the late Middle Ages."[68]

In contrast to the Russian far right, Putin's opponents employ the term *feudalism* or *neo-/new feudalism* more often than the "New Middle Ages," presumably since "feudalism" underscores the economic system and implies economic backwardness and technological underdevelopment (associations that the Russian far right wants to avoid).

Theories of the return to the Middle Ages, whether enthusiastically endorsed or strongly deplored, cannot substantiate the claim that medieval times are upon us. Rather, they should be viewed as a reaction to the crisis of the future. A return to the medieval past (or to any other historical period, for that matter) is impossible: every historical epoch is a unique and supremely complex "continuum" (*Zusammenhang*, in the German historical idiom) of a multitude of concrete historical factors and is therefore not replicable. Certain traits of the past may endure in subsequent epochs, but they typically undergo

significant transformation in new contexts. If the admirers of political neomedievalism were to succeed in creating the society they fantasize about, we would be in a new and awful future, a simulacrum of the medieval past, rather than any real renewal of those times. It would instead be a showcase for features such as anti-enlightenment and anti-democratic trends, legitimized by the neomedieval discourse that is itself a novel phenomenon.

To stress the absurdity that the historical past can return, Isaiah Berlin applied the then-neglected term "neomedievalism" to ridicule the Russian Slavophiles' idealization of Russia's pre-Petrine past, by labeling them "neo-medievalists" and grouping them with "Distributists and Pre-Raphaelites and other nostalgic romantics."[69]

While the Middle Ages certainly will not come back, their instrumentalization is undoubtedly on the rise. Disseminated through neomedieval memory politics, medieval allusions are increasingly mobilized to shape historical memory and the political imagination, inculcating a view of democracy as a historical aberration. Neomedieval history politics motivates its adherents to dream of a hierarchical or caste-oriented social organization, while the appeal to the medieval past legitimizes existing social inequality and helps form a new system of social and political subjugation. In Putin's Russia, as in the West, political neomedievalism is emblematic of the crisis of democracy.

The Memory of the Perpetrators and Mobmemory

Two more concepts central to my analysis need to be introduced here: *the memory of the perpetrators* and *mobmemory*. The concept of the memory of the perpetrators[70] refers to a particular memory regime rooted in right-wing authoritarian populism.[71] The memory of the perpetrators seeks to undermine the victim-centered memory culture – the cosmopolitan memory – that formed largely around memories of the Holocaust. Focused on the suffering of the victims of historical injustices and crimes against humanity, cosmopolitan memory placed the victims rather than the "victors" or "heroes" at the heart of historical narratives organized around compassion and empathy.[72] This culture of remembrance, which emerged in Western Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s, challenged what Pierre Nora aptly called *le roman national*. By acknowledging collective historical responsibility for the Holocaust, the cosmopolitan memory transformed it into "a generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil."[73] The international success of the cosmopolitan memory gave rise to hopes that it will result in "an emerging global consensus on human rights,"[74] which "could serve as a model for imagining new democratic solidarities."[75]

In recent years, scholars have noted the decay of the cosmopolitan memory, and I agree with their diagnosis.[76] The formation of Putinism and other authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe interconnects closely with attempts to develop aggressive nationalistic narratives, which only a few decades ago were

thought to have been overcome. As Nikolay Koposov puts it: "Today, the conceptual pair crucial to understanding the politics of history [...] is 'populism and memory,' while in the 1990s it was, rather, 'memory and democracy.'"[77]

Far-right populist history politics builds on positively evaluated memories of dominance. The memory of the perpetrators is promoted by those who, regardless of their personal circumstances, sympathized – and continue to sympathize – with oppressive regimes and are eager to reclaim this legacy. Theodor Adorno's analysis of the persistence of neo-Nazi sympathies in post-war Germany offers important psychological insights into the appeal of such memories and displays their potential for resurgence. According to Adorno,

> the collective fantasies of power [were] harbored by those people who, individually, had no power and who indeed could feel any self-worth at all only by virtue of such collective power.[78]

Re-Stalinization and political neomedievalism, fixated as they are on the propaganda of state terror, are Russia-specific trends that foster the memory of the perpetrators. Post-Soviet Russia is an extreme case of this memory development, since the legacy of the totalitarian regime and its crimes has never been consistently confronted there. The Russian memory of the perpetrators is rooted in a politics that denies historical responsibility for any crimes committed by Russia – including the Soviet crimes – and is reinforced by the right-wing's tendentious uses of history world wide.[79] The Western-style victim-centered culture of remembrance that would have condemned the Soviet crimes in the same way as Nazi crimes were condemned in the West had barely begun to emerge in the late 1980s and was marginalized after the failure of the democratic reforms in the late 1990s. Under Putin, the destruction of this memory culture has become a political priority.[80]

Putinism is largely founded on the social and political preeminence of the secret services, whose members constitute the core of post-Soviet government circles.[81] Service veterans and current members, clandestine informants and former Soviet apparatchiks often implicated in the repressions, as well as their descendants, most of whom have successfully integrated into the post-Soviet ruling stratum, have formed and continue to form the social basis of the memory of the perpetrators and enjoy privileges, recognition, and protection under the Putin regime.

The Soviets never fully acknowledged the criminal nature of their secret services. By blaming Stalinist crimes on "the cult of personality," Nikita Khrushchev made the subsequent glorification of their apparatus less controversial than it might otherwise have been. Under Putin, the celebration of the secret police (Cheka-NKVD-KGB-FSB) reemerged after the public exposure of its crimes during the *glasnost'* and perestroika of the late 1980s.[82]

In the USSR, the repressive regime was sustained by communist ideology, which legitimized it by promising a radiant egalitarian future. In Putin's Russia, a history politics that validates the great-power imperialist agenda and mounting

social inequalities is vindicated by its messianic cult of World War II, re-Stalinization, and neomedievalism. Stalin venerated Ivan the Terrible as one tyrant might be expected to revere another. But he had no intention of replacing the communist future-oriented ideology with a politics of memory that would reveal the tsarist past as a model, as Putin is doing today. Communists could never have extolled the medieval social system that is central to neomedievalism. On the contrary, Putinism has no ideology and no vision of the future, which is why the Kremlin wants to turn time backward and is seeking an ideal society in the historical past.

The desire coupled with the inability to formulate a new forward-looking ideology as a system of abstract principles has been acutely felt by Putinists. The National Security Strategy, updated on July 2, 2022, called for the development of "attractive ideological foundations of the future world order."[83] Alexander Dugin seconds this by proposing the creation of "Putinism," a "new ideology," that will, he believes, help in rectifying Russia's military failure in Ukraine.[84]

The memory of the perpetrators often takes the form of *mobmemory*. This concept calls attention to the complex mechanisms of memory formation based on mutual influences among academia, popular culture, politics, religious movements, and activism.[85] I conceptualize mobmemory as a sub-type of what Pierre Nora has described as the present-day artificial memory produced by various mnemonic entrepreneurs rather than "naturally" transmitted through the generations.[86] However, Nora's concept of artificial memory contains no explicit reference to populist memory, which is important to my analysis. In my view, mobmemory is an alternative to the concepts that emphasize the positive value of certain artificial memory constructs.[87] The mediatization of memory plays a critical role in its formation.[88]

There is a deep interconnection between mobmemory, viewed as a form for collective representations of the past, and the memory of the perpetrators, which refers to the content of such representations. This interconnection is due to a focus on criminal, shameful, or politically controversial aspects of national history. Integral to right-wing populism, mobmemory implies a secret – not necessarily mystic or religious – knowledge that allows its adherents (in their view) to "discover" the hidden reasons behind those historical instances of collective violence and regard them as beneficial to their "national communities." In "recollecting" the advantages of the anti-democratic social organization, mobmemory prompts its adepts to take pride in the past repressions. Its extensive use of a national past forces even its opponents to share at least part of its frame of reference, thus undermining societal resistance against it. Mobmemory engineers a consensus between the right-wing populist regime and its support base, and between the mob and its leaders.[89] Mobilization is at its core: divisive and militant, it can be easily deployed in support of a political agenda. Its engagement with power may seem democratic because it includes important bottom-up components but, like populism,[90] it is an anti-liberal phenomenon. An "authoritarian condition" such as Putinism proves extremely hospitable to this specific form of memory, but it may also surface in democratic countries.[91]

In post-Soviet Russia, mobmemory galvanizes the supporters of the idea that state terror is the best form of governance for Russians. In what follows, I analyze various sources of the post-Soviet mobmemory's formation, found in the interplay among the teachings of Orthodox sects and post-Soviet historiography and the political discourse of the Russian far right and post-Soviet popular culture. The discourse of the Kremlin and its proxies has been a powerful influence on those interconnections, as has the implementation of those ideas in the daily practices of religious communities in Russia. The post-Soviet mobmemory is instrumental in creating an atmosphere that condones violence and elevates it to a prideworthy feature of the Russian national heritage.

Notes

1 The term "Kievan Rus" has been disappearing from Russian history textbooks. https://lenta.ru/news/2022/05/23/russsssss/
2 Mikhail Pogodin, "Za russkuiu starinu," in *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), 246.
3 Maxime Danesin, "The European Middle Ages through the Prism of Contemporary Japanese Literature: A Study of Vinland Saga, Spice & Wolf and l'Éclipse," *Mutual Images Journal*, 2016, 1: 95–122.
4 On the establishment of medievalism as a field by Leslie J. Workman, see Kathleen Verduin, "The Founding and the Founder: Medievalism and the Legacy of Leslie J. Workman," *Studies in Medievalism*, 2009, *XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)* ed. Karl Fugelso. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009: 20; and David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2015), 172. See also Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, "Making Medievalism: A Critical Overview," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, eds. Emery and Utz (Cambridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 1–10. On various attempts to define medievalism, see *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
5 M.J. Toswell, "The Tropes of Medievalism," *Studies in Medievalism, XVII: Defining Medievalism(s)*: 69.
6 Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalism(s): Making the Past in the Present*, 6; Tom Shippey, "Medievalisms and Why They Matter," *Studies in Medievalism, XVII*: 46-47.
7 David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2015),178.
8 Karl Fugelso, "Editorial Note," *Studies in Medievalism XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*. ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010),: xi.
9 Leslie Coote, "A Short Essay about Neo-medievalism," *Studies in Medievalism, XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*: 25.
10 Lauren S. Mayer, "Dark Matters and Slippery Words Grappling with Neomedievalism (s)," *Studies in Medievalism, XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*: 68. On attempts to define neomedievalism, see also *Studies in Medievalism*, 2011, XX.
11 Umberto Eco describes "such postmodern neomedieval Manhattan new castles as the Citicorp Center and Trump Tower" and their implicit social structure as "curious instances of a neomedievalism, with their courts open to peasants and merchants and the well-protected high-level apartments reserved for the lords." Umberto Eco, "*Dreaming the Middle Ages*," in Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 61–62. Another of his books, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, is sometimes mistaken for his major theoretical

contribution to the study of the New Middle Ages. However, Eco himself viewed this latter volume as a mere handbook, adding the disclaimer, "I was not claiming to be original." *Eco, Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), viii.

12 Umberto Eco, "Living in the New Middle Ages," in *Eco, Travels in Hyperreality*, 74, 76.

13 Eco, "Dreaming the Middle Ages," 69.

14 Eco, "Dreaming the Middle Ages," 69, 71, 79.

15 I also agree with Bruce Holsinger's account of neomedievalism as an essentially conservative phenomenon. Relating his approach to Eco, Holsinger shows that allusions to the Middle Ages can inspire conservative ideology and influence political action. Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007). Holsinger speaks of "a general spirit of 'neomedievalism' suffusing the modern era, a spirit embodied in specific modes – barbarism, ironic revisitation, reconstruction, romanticism, and so on – that collectively testify to a pervasive fascination with all things medieval in the twentieth-century West." Bruce Holsinger, "Empire, Apocalypse, and the 9/11 Premodern," *Critical Inquiry*, 2008, 34/3: 469. See also Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

16 Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, 177; Lukes, "Comparative Neomedievalisms," 1–9; Shippey, "Medievalisms and Why They Matter," 50. On the political uses of the new medievalism, see Richard Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto. Past Imperfect*. (Kalamazoo, MI: ARC Humanities Press, 2017); and Utz, "Divnye novye medievalizmy?" *Neprikosnovenny zapas*, 2018, 117/1: 4–18.

17 Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, 179.

18 Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 8.

19 *ibid*., 81.

20 In the introduction, Kaufman and Sturtevant briefly mention the significance of "[t]he fantasy of a pure, orderly patriarchal and monarchical medieval past in which everyone knew his or her place," but they avoid further exploration of these aspects of the powerful attraction of the Middle Ages for the far right. *ibid*., 7, 84.

21 Daniel Lukes, "Comparative Neomedievalisms: A Little Bit Medieval," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 2015, 5: 1–9. On the discussion of neomedievalism's relation to postmodernism, whether as a pure simulacrum unconnected in any way to "medieval reality" or presupposing some relation to the historical past, see Lesley Coote, "A Short Essay about Neo-Medievalism," *Studies in Medievalism, XIX XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*: 25–33 and M. J. Toswell, "The Simulacrum of Neomedievalism," *Studies in Medievalism, XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*: 44–57. The prism of the linguistic turn in historiography is sometimes applied to neomedievalism in those debates. See Amy S. Kaufman, "Medieval Unmoored," *Studies in Medievalism, XIX: Defining Neomedievalism(s)*: 6.

22 See, for example, the Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization website, which also adds that "a greater denial of reality" also distinguishes neomedievalism from medievalism.

23 According to this approach, neomedievalism "laughingly" reshapes itself "into an alternate universe of medievalisms, a fantasy of medievalisms, a meta-medievalism." Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, "Living with Neomedievalism," *Studies in Medievalism,* XVIII: *Defining Medievalism(s) II,* ed. K. Fugelso, (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009), 56.

24 KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, *Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy: From Tolkien to Game of Thrones* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2019), 139.

25 Dina Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 15–17, 23–33. I follow Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's concept of the culture industry: Horkheimer and Adorno,

Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique*, 1975, 6: 12–13. On "commercialization" as an important aspect of the new attitudes to death, see Michael Hviid Jacobsen, "'Spectacular Death': Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès's *Admirable History of Death*," *Humanities*, 2016, 5/2: 1–20. On neomedievalism as an example of the mutual interdependence between the market and popular culture, see *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David M. Marshall (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007).

26 See Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death*, 33–45.

27 On the normalization of the Nazis in popular culture, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015). As Max Silverman points out, "a major danger today is a new amnesia in which shock, recognition and 'readability,' essential for a politics of representation, have given way to the normalization of horror in contemporary society." Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 175.

28 Paul Freedman and Gabrielle Spiegel observe the global paradigmatic shift in the reception and representations of the Middle Ages in professional historiography conditioned by the postmodern reinterpretation of the Middle Ages: ("a certain demonizing of the Middle Ages"). Freedman and Spiegel, "Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies," *The American Historical Review*, 1998, 103/3: 700. "The most popular topics in medieval cultural studies in America at the moment – by some reports – are death, pus, contagion, defilement, blood, abjection, disgust and humiliation, castration, pain, and autopsy." *ibid*., 678.

29 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

30 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 1984, 146/1: 55.

31 "But it [the description of the archive - D.Kh.] deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history; it breaks the thread of transcendental teleologies; and where anthropological thought once questioned man's being or subjectivity, it now bursts open the other, and the outside." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 131.

32 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "L'histoire immobile," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 1974, 3: 673–92.

33 Jacques Le Goff, "Time: The Splintered Continuum," *India International Centre Quarterly*, 1988, 15/2: 1–14. Other historians – for example, Aron Gurevich, the leading Soviet proponent of the *Annales* school – also asserted that the medieval vision of historical time was culturally specific and that its cyclical and morally charged nature had nothing to do with objective linear temporality. Aron Gurevich, *Kategorii srednevekovoi kul'tury* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972).

34 This fragment from Albert Einstein's letter was widely quoted in popular-science books: "For any of us devoted physicists, the difference between past, present, and future is an illusion even if a persistent one." Albert Einstein and Michele Besso, *Correspondance 1903–1955*, ed. and trans. Pierre Speziali (Paris: Hermann, 1972).

35 The rejection of objective time emerged long before the past decade. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the notion of the objectivity of time was already being critiqued in domains as varied as literature, philosophy, and physics.

36 By the late 2010s, the notion of linear time had been categorized by some as "a time of capitalism, colonialism, and militarism." Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable," *new formations* a journal of culture/theory/politics, 2017, 92: 60.
37 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax*, 2011, 17/4: 4–18.
38 For example, *Malaise dans la temporalité*, ed. Paul Zawadzki (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2002); and Aleida Assmann, "Transformations of the Modern Time Regime," in *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, eds. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 39–56.
39 François Hartog, *Chronos. L'Occident aux prises avec le Temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020) has been translated into English as *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).
40 François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Minuit, 2003), 28. On the connection between the rise of memory culture and the suspension of future as characteristic of presentism, see Juhan Hellerma, "Negotiating Presentism: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Historical Change," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 2020, 24/3–4: 442–64.
41 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 411–436.
42 The notion of history's acceleration was highly relevant to understanding the challenges that democracy faced at the turn of the third millennium. See Jean Chesneaux, "Speed and Democracy: An Uneasy Dialogue," *Social Science Information*, 2000, 39: 3, 407–20; and William E. Scheuerman, *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
43 On the crisis in perception of historical time, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Alban Bensa "Images et usages du temps," *Terrain*, 1997, 29: 5–18; Krzysztof Pomian, *L'Ordre du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); and Jean Chesneaux, *Habiter le temps: Passé, présent, future: Esquisse d'un dialogue possible* (Paris: Bayard, 1996).
44 Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé: Contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1990). Both Gumbrecht and Hartog were influenced by Koselleck: Gumbrecht was his student; Hartog supported the translation of his works into French.
45 Reinhart Koselleck, *L'expérience de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard/ Le Seuil, 1997).
46 Richard Utz, "Coming to Terms with Medievalism," *European Journal of English Studies*, 2011, 15/2: 104, 106.
47 Mariëlle Wijermars, whose book represents an important contribution to the discussion of memory politics in Russia and especially the new oprichnina, speaks of the oscillations between those temporal modes. Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2018), 160.
48 Carolyn Dinshaw, "All kinds of time," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 2013, 35/1: 3–25. See also the MEMO website with its insistence on the fragmented nature of stories told in neomedieval narratives. http://medievalelectronicmultimedia.org/?page_id=39.
49 Roberto Vacca was one of the first to make this connection between the fantasized medieval society and the primitivism and ignorance that may be brought about by a technogenic Apocalypse. Vacca, *The Coming Dark Age* (New York: Doubleday& Co., Inc., 1973).
50 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

51 Stephen J. Kobrin argues that "[i]n politics and economics, as in science fiction movies, it may help to attempt to visualize the unknown future in terms of the known past." Kobrin, "Back to the Future: Neomedievalism and the Postmodern Digital World Economy," *Journal of International Affairs*, 1998, 51/2: 364.
52 For a more recent example of this approach, see Bohumil Doboš, *New Middle Ages. Geopolitics of Post-Westphalian World* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020).
53 Jan Zielonka, "Conclusions: Implications of Neo-Medievalism," *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union* (Oxford: Oxford Academic Online, 2006).
54 Alain Minc, *Le nouveau moyen âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 4.
55 "Žižek: Nadchodzi nowe średniowiecze," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 7, 2015.
56 Frank Ankersmit, "Manifesto for an Analytical Political History," in *Manifestos for History*, eds. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (London, New York: Routledge, 2007), 179–96.
57 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 157.
58 Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
59 *ibid.*, 6. McFate compares today's private military companies to the mercenary armies of medieval kings and fears that "the United States has opened the Pandora's Box of mercenarianism [and] for-profit warfare." *ibid.*, 152.
60 Avoiding general reflections about historical temporality, Joel Kotkin nevertheless underscores the importance of democracy in the progressive vision of time. Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020).
61 Kotkin combines Marxist analysis with a belief in reverse historical temporality, as though Marxism could be conceivably absent in the notions of social progress and objective, linear, and irreversible time.
62 Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 208. This reasoning relies on a long tradition of unfavorably comparing socialism, and especially Soviet socialism, with feudalism. Konstantin Leontiev was one of the first to equate socialism and feudalism. Leontiev, *Zapiski otshel'nika* (1876) (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992). On Leontiev's views, see Henrietta Mondry, "In Praise of Ethnic Dress: Konstantin Leontiev's Politics of Diversity," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 2014, 58/1: 57–75.
63 Vladimir Shlyapentokh, *Sovremennaia Rossiia kak Feodal'noe obshchestvo. Novyi rakurs* (Moscow: Stolitsa-print, 2008).
64 Mikhail Zakharov, "Staroe Novoe srednevekov'e," *polit.ru*, May 13, 2010.
65 Richard E. Ericson, *The Post-Soviet Russian Economic System: An Industrial Feudalism?* 1999. http://sintak.unika.ac.id/staff/blog/uploaded/5811998215/files/russian-economic-system.pdf, 5, 17.
66 Andreas Åslund, "Russia's Neo-Feudal Capitalism," *Project Syndicate*, April 27, 2017. In his earlier work, Åslund had claimed that Putin's Russia had created a "normal market economy" based on private property and was rapidly becoming a society with "a strong middle class." Åslund, *Russia's Capitalist Revolution: Why Market Reform Succeeded and Democracy Failed* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007), 301, 305.
67 Andrey Illarionov, "Drugaia strana," *Kommersant*, January 23, 2006; Leonid Kosals, "Klanovyi kapitalizm v Rossii," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 2006, 50/6: 120–45; Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Plan 'Krepostnye': Kak ustroena sovremennaia soslovnaia Rossiia," *Novaia Gazeta*, July 5, 2021.
68 Alexander Chepurenko, "Est' li v Rossii srednii klass?" *Kommsersant*, December 11, 2018. See also Sergei Medvedev, *Park Krymskogo perioda: Khroniki tret'ego sroka* (Moscow: Bookmate, 2017).
69 Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), 495.

70 My use of "the memory of the perpetrators" differs from the prevalent use of this concept in memory studies. See Khapaeva, "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of Re-Stalinization," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2016, 49: 61–73. In this article, I employed the term "neomedievalism" in my analysis of the post-Soviet historical memory.
71 On right-wing populism, see Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Manuel Anselmi, *Populism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2017).
72 In the vast literature devoted to this memory culture, Saul Friedländer's research remains fundamental in defining the centrality of the Holocaust to memory formation. Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993). According to Gabrielle M. Spiegel, the upsurge of memory known as the Memory Boom was conditioned by the rise of the memory of the Holocaust. Spiegel, "Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time," *History and Theory*, 2002, 41: 149–62. See also Jay Winter, "The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the 'Memory Boom'," *GHI Bulletin*, 2000, 27: 69. Scholars have emphasized several aspects of this memory culture, including the culture of victimhood and "a public culture of collective remorse." Robert Elias, *The Politics of Victimization: Victims, Victimology, and Human Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).
73 Jeffrey Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2002, 5/1: 6.
74 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 197, 203.
75 Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory*, 179.
76 On various challenges to the cosmopolitan memory, see Anna C. Bull and Hans L. Hansen, "On Agonistic Memory," *Memory Studies*, 2015, 9/4: 390–404; Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Johann Michel, "L'institutionalisation du crime contre l'humanité et l'avènement du régime victimo-mémoriel en France," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 2011, 44/3: 663–84; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), 121; and Alison Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). Among multiple challenges presently faced by the cosmopolitan memory, I limit my study here to those that emanate from the far right.
77 Nikolay Koposov, "Populism and Memory: Legislation of the Past in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia," *East European Politics and Societies*, 2022, 36/1: 272–97.
78 Theodor Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past," in Adorno, *Critical Models: Interpretations and Catchwords,* trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 95.
79 On the argument that "populism is about constructing and using a past," see Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, "Populist Use of Memory and Constitutionalism: Two Comments – I," *German Law Journal*, 2005, 6/2: 394. See also Ritchie Savage, "From McCarthyism to the Tea Party: Interpreting Anti-Leftist Forms of US Populism in Comparative Perspective," *New Political Science*, 2012, 34/4: 572–73; and Norbert Lechner, "À la recherche de la communauté perdue: Les défis de la démocratie en Amérique latine," *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 199, 43/3: 587. Compare this with Frank Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
80 See Nikolay Koposov, *Pamiat' strogogo rezhima: istoriia i politika v Rossii* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011).

81 Felshtinsky and Pribylovsky, *The Corporation*, 171–258; Ol'ga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White, "The Sovietization of Russian Politics," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2009, 25/4: 283–309.
82 Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security: The Chekist Tradition, from Lenin to Putin* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011).
83 www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046.
84 Alexander Dugin, "Integral'nyi suverenitet," *Katekhon*, July 4, 2022.
85 On the role of various media in the formation of the Soviet and post-Soviet historical memory, see Catriona Kelly, *St Petersburg: Shadows of the Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
86 Pierre Nora, "Entre mémoire et histoire," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1: *La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), xix, xxiv. Nora also speaks of "our artificial hyper-realization of the past" in "Between Memory and History." Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, 1989, 26: 18.
87 Among concepts that emphasize the positive role of artificial memory are *prosthetic memory* (Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2004], 9, 146, 148–49) and *postmemory* (Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse*, 1992–1993, 15/2: 3–29).
88 Andrew Hoskins, "The Mediatisation of Memory," in *Save As… Digital Memories*, eds. Joanna Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins, and Anna Reading (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 36.
89 In Edmund Burke's works, the word "mob" denoted violent revolutionary crowds. On Edmund Burke's views, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), 168, 171–72; and Mark Neocleous, *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism* (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2005), 23, 25–26. I use the "mob" part of "mobmemory" to refer to the violent ideologies of the far right, following Hermann Glaser's description of the youth movement of Wilhelminian era that created a substrate for fascist youth organizations. Hermann Glaser, The *Cultural Roots of National Socialism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 208–210.
90 Yannis Stavrakakis, "The Return of 'the People': Populism and Anti-Populism in the Shadow of the European Crisis," *Constellations*, 2014, 21/4: 505–17.
91 According to Karl Schlögel, "authoritarian conditions are hostile to memory. A mature historical culture and a civil culture belong together." Schlögel, "Places and Strata of Memory: Approaches to Eastern Europe," *Eurozine*, December 19, 2008.

2

PUTIN'S NEOMEDIEVAL POLITICS OF HISTORY

Post-Soviet Neomedievalism

Interviewing Vladimir Putin about the proposed changes to the Russian Constitution, which would authorize him to run for two more six-year presidential terms after the one that would expire in 2024, a journalist asked: "Will you be with us forever?" Putin responded: "If you wish it."[1] He did not say, however, what position he would hold. When the staged referendum of July 2020 ratified the amendments to the Constitution, the theory that Putin would be Russia's new tsar promptly went viral on Russian social media. Memes portraying a crowned Putin and articles discussing if he would become a tsar flooded the internet.[2] Some of them mocked Putin, others expressed discontent that he had not yet been crowned.[3] This topic agitated Russians so much that several government agencies and newspapers published an interview with Putin entitled "Putin Disagrees with Those Who Call Him Tsar."[4] Previously, Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov and Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin announced that Putin was not interested in the restoration of the monarchy.[5]

The amendments to the Constitution did not launch a new controversy, however. Instead, they invigorated the ongoing debate about the restoration of the monarchy in Russia.[6] In 2002, Putin said he considered constitutional monarchy "a good addition to the democratic institutions of many West European countries."[7] In 2007, the ruling United Russia party planned to offer him "pseudo-monarchical powers" to "avoid the hassles" of unconstitutional elections for a third term. The annexation of Crimea gave new impetus to the restoration project. In August 2014, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, suggested that Putin should become emperor.[8] Several Crimea-related politicians – Natalya Poklonskaya, prosecutor general of

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Crimea and later an MP, known for her monarchist sympathies, and Sergey Aksyonov, head of annexed Crimea – advocated for Putin's coronation in the late 2010s.

The Russian monarchists had been marginal in the early 1990s, their main slogan being the restoration of the Romanov dynasty. Subsequently, the movement grew into a significant political force and in 2012, it was registered as a political party.[9] In 2016, Konstantin Malofeyev, an "Orthodox oligarch," head of the pro-Putin Double-Headed Eagle monarchist society, and owner of the website *Katekhon*, which is notorious for disseminating political disinformation, positioned himself as the movement's leader.[10]

According to a sociological survey taken in September 2019 by the extreme-nationalist-controlled federal Regnum News Agency, one-third of Russians support the idea of a constitutional monarchy.[11] The Orthodox Church hierarchy can also be counted in that camp. Proposals and petitions with many thousands of signatures soliciting Putin to become tsar have been perplexing the Russian internet since the early 2000s, and debates about Putin's lavish palace in Gelendzhik triggered statements such as: "A tsar should have a palace!"[12] Filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov and writer Alexander Prokhanov, symbolic figures of the Russian extreme right, are constantly campaigning for Putin's coronation.[13] In 2020, *Russian Dream 2050*, a "movement" organized by Prokhanov, adopted the restoration of the monarchy as one of its prime tenets.[14]

This nostalgia for monarchy is a good fit for the neomedieval memory politics of the Russian government.[15] Since the 2000s, neomedievalism has been actively promoted by politicians close to Putin's administration and by Orthodox clergy and sectarians. A broad neomedieval consensus among the Russian far right regarding Russia's future was formed around their attempts to set up an ideological agenda for Putin's second term (2004–2008). For them the time was ripe, since the period from 2003 to 2007 was marked by decreasing support for democratic parties in Russia. In October 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a Russian oligarch, was arrested and imprisoned under false charges of tax evasion, fraud, and embezzlement after his anti-Putin interventions in Russian politics. His arrest and the reaction to his trial demonstrated that most Russians were unlikely to protest political repressions and that such trials could even be welcomed by the Russian public. Post-Soviet society was clearly ready for an authoritarian turn. The falsifications of the 2007 Duma elections, which left Russians largely indifferent, were another sign that reassured the authorities. Characteristically, the period from 2003 to 2007 was also when Putin's regime began paying closer attention to history.

Neomedieval memory politics has unfolded on several levels and has employed a variety of methods and agencies to engage its Russian audiences. Aiming at creating a cult of the Russian Middle Ages, it contributes greatly to the growing popularity of right-wing populism in Russia (and vice versa).

The Kremlin delegates much of its memory politics to the far-right movements and religious sects that act as its proxies.[16] The Izborsky Club has assumed the lion's share of these activities. Created in the wake of the anti-Putin protests in September 2012 and chaired by Alexander Prokhanov, the club consists of far-right ideologists and political activists. Although in competition for public attention, political leverage from official channels, and resources, Izborsky Club members share several convictions and goals, including the restoration of the Russian Empire[17] and a belief in the messianic nature of "Russian civilization."[18] They also agree that Russia is a self-sufficient civilization of a higher order than the West,[19] which is declared a constant threat to Russian civilization, "the matrix of a rotten culture based on perversion and sin, lies and cynicism, violence and hypocrisy [...] where Satan fell."[20] To successfully lead a sacred war against the West, Russian society should purify its ranks by destroying the "fifth and sixth columns" consisting of liberals, democrats, and Westernizers.[21]

The Izborsky Club members' geopolitical programs run the gamut from the restoration of the Russian/Soviet Empire within its Soviet borders to Moscow's control over the territories and peoples of all former Soviet satellites. Putin's December 2021 ultimatum to NATO propelled these imperial dreams to the level of Russian state politics. Some Izborsky Club affiliates, such as the neo-Eurasianists, go way beyond this, with their dreams of conquering the entire Eurasian continent and North America.

Izborsky Club members recognize that the restoration of a territorial empire in the twenty-first century is no easy venture, not least because it would require considerable social change within Russia. For all that, though, a return to the medieval social order is considered an important objective necessary for future conquests, which is why it is so central to many of their political projects. Most members agree that there can be no equality among people.[22] For them, Enlightenment values and democracy are part of a "masonic plot" and are alien to "the Russian soul." Their views contain echoes of the now-viral Dark Enlightenment theory, which maintains that all the evils of the contemporary world – humanism, democracy, and equality – occurred due to the Enlightenment.[23]

Ivan the Terrible in Putin's Russia

The politics of neomedievalism lionizes medieval warlords, paramount among whom is Ivan the Terrible (1533–1584). As his name might suggest, this Russian tsar is best remembered for establishing, for the first time in Russian history, a regime of state terror called the *oprichnina* (1565–1572). In 1565, Ivan left Moscow and went with his sons and court to the nearby settlement of Alexandrovo. From there, he announced his decision to abandon his throne because he could no longer endure the boyars' (Russia's medieval aristocrats) plots against him. Horrified crowds of Muscovites mobbed the Kremlin, urging the boyars to get their tsar back. On his return, Ivan instituted the oprichnina, a personal domain with its own territory, army, finances, and administration. He declared

he had the right to indict, try, and execute "traitors" and take possession of their fortunes as he saw fit. Literally a state apart, the oprichnina was isolated from the *zemshchina*, which comprised the rest of the Russian land, and the two were governed separately. Ivan even appointed a jester-tsar, Simeon Bekbulatovich, a baptized Tartar khan, to rule over the zemshchina. The terror-wielding oprichniks, a para-military regiment and Ivan's personal guard accountable exclusively to him, had two symbols of their power – a dog's head to show that they were "the tsar's dogs" and a broom to "sweep treason away." Chronicles and foreign travelers have left accounts of their appalling atrocities, which included the humiliation, rape, torture, and killing of thousands of innocent men, women, and children, with the tsar's connivance or on his direct orders.[24] Their victims were not primarily or exclusively the boyars, but simple peasants and merchants. Among Ivan's other casualties was Ivan Ivanovich, his son, whom the tsar murdered in 1581, and Metropolitan Filipp II, canonized by the Orthodox Church in 1652, who was strangled on Ivan's orders by his oprichnik-in-chief, Malyuta Skuratov.

In pre-revolutionary Russia, the best-known visual representations of Ivan – for example, Mark Antokolsky's sculpture, Vasily Vasnetsov's portrait of a paranoid maniac, and the filicide depicted by Ilya Repin in his famous painting "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16, 1581" – reflected a highly critical attitude to this tsar. Ivan IV is absent from the Russian state leaders represented on the Millennium of Russia monument erected in 1862 to celebrate the legendary coming of the Normans (Varangians), the purported founders of the Russian state. Of all the Russian rulers, only Joseph Stalin expressed an admiration for Ivan IV and his reign of terror.[25] But even Stalin did not build monuments in his honor.

The campaign to memorialize Ivan the Terrible in bronze began in 2005, when the administration of Lyubim, a small provincial town and center of the *Oprichnoe bratstvo* (Oprichnina Brotherhood), proposed to build a monument to Ivan the Terrible, on the grounds that he had founded the settlement that grew into Lyubim. (The *Oprichnoe bratstvo* is a neo-oprichnik religious sect, a movement of contemporary admirers of Ivan's terror whose aim is to revive the oprichnina in Russia.) That monument has yet to happen.

In 2012, the city of Arkhangelsk, a center of the Northern GULAG system under Stalin, unveiled a plaque naming Ivan the city's founder and continuing: "To the first Russian tsar, the originator of the sixteenth-century democratic reforms […] from the grateful citizens of Arkhangelsk."[26] Most likely, this reference to "democratic reforms" in this text is an allusion to Stalin's appreciation of Ivan's terror as a factor that unified the tsar and his people against the boyars.

However, no state-sponsored or privately initiated monuments to Ivan the Terrible existed until October 14, 2016, when Vladimir Medinsky, then minister of culture and an engineer of neomedieval memory politics, unveiled the first bronze equestrian monument to Ivan in the city of Oryol, which had been founded in the oprichnina's second year. In his speech on that occasion, Oryol governor Vadim Potomsky called Ivan a great state leader and compared him to

Putin.[27] Patriarch Kirill had endorsed the erection of that monument to Ivan IV, praising him as "an important state leader." The Russian far right – the neo-Eurasianists, the Russian monarchists, and especially the neo-oprichniks – was animated by the event. Alexander Prokhanov applauded this commemoration of "a great tsar,"[28] and Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich, a neo-oprichnik leader of the Union of the Orthodox Banner-Bearers, lobbied for another monument to Ivan IV to be placed in front of the main KGB/FSB building on Moscow's Lubyanka Square.[29] Although that statue of Ivan never materialized, there is a clear historical continuity in this proposal: Ivan's statue was to take the place previously occupied by the monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Cheka (precursor of the KGB), the secret police that implemented the Red Terror during and in the aftermath of the Civil War. After the failed putsch of August 1991, Dzerzhinsky's monument had been dismantled by democratic activists and removed from the square.

In November 2016, Vladimir Zhirinovsky proposed renaming Moscow's Lenin Avenue as Ivan the Terrible Highway, so that "foreign delegations [after arrival at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport – D.Kh.] would understand better where they are going to."[30] On April 26, 2017, another bronze monument to Ivan IV was erected in Alexandrovo, the historical capital of the oprichnina. On the same day, however, even before its official unveiling, the monument was summarily removed due to the protests of local citizens.[31]

On July 26, 2017, the Alexandrovo monument resurfaced in central Moscow's Walk of Heroes.[32] Then, on December 7, 2019, the itinerant statue was finally inaugurated by the local administration of Alexandrovo in an official ceremony. Another monument to Ivan the Terrible, which lauded him as a good family man, was planned for 2017 in Ruza, which had been part of the oprichnina's territory.[33] Konstantin Erusalimsky aptly notes in his analysis that all three monuments reflect more than a general reverence to Ivan and his rule: references to the oprichnina and autarchy are essential to them all.[34]

The celebration of Ivan the Terrible as a great Russian tsar goes hand in hand with the glorification of his military conquests, which Russian nationalists deem foundational for the Russian Empire.[35] On December 26, 2019, a bronze monument to the terrible tsar was erected in Cheboksary, capital of the Chuvash Republic, which Ivan had incorporated into the Russian tsardom in 1551.[36] By 2019, this monument mania had spread to the Autonomous Republic of Tatarstan, a historical successor of the Kazan Khaganate, which Ivan conquered in 1552, and to the Astrakhan Khaganate conquered by him in 1554. In Astrakhan, however, local Tatar activists protested the erection of Ivan's monument, and did so successfully,[37] even though Konstantin Malofeyev, an enthusiastic supporter of the Orthodox extremist movement *tsarebozhie* (literally, "deification of the tsar," also known as *neooprichnoe bogoslovie*, "neo-oprichnik theology," which will be discussed below), had offered to foot the bill.[38] Tatarstan also rejected the proposed monument to Ivan in Kazan and turned down a proposal to rename the M-12 highway in honor of Ivan the Terrible.[39]

There have, of course, been no monuments to Ivan's victims, the sole exception being a small, simple installation in the Siberian town of Kansk, erected in 2016 by artist Vladislav Gultyaev to protest the proliferation of monuments to Ivan. Unsurprisingly, it was soon removed by city officials.[40]

The monumental propaganda of Ivan IV, which commemorated even Ivan's grandfather, Ivan III, by a monument erected in Kaluga in 2017, is complemented by the cinematographic idealization of the tsar and his oprichnina produced with support from the Russian government. Andrey Eshpai's TV series *Ivan the Terrible* (2009), aired in primetime on the state-owned Channel One Russia, introduces Ivan the Terrible in a sympathetic light. Eshpai confessed in an interview that, although horrified by Ivan's terror, he personally "could not help admiring" him because Ivan "formed the country we live in," which is why "the more people know about him and our history, the better. We cannot renounce our past."[41] Eshpai defended Ivan as a sincere person who "was misled," suffered, and repented. In its efforts to delve into his soul and show his human side, this TV series joins a growing international trend of empathizing with the perpetrators of historical atrocities.[42]

In the 2010s, an uplifting depiction of Ivan the Terrible's terror surfaced in *The Time of Troubles* (Alexander Daruga, 2010), a TV series commissioned and financed by the Moscow city government. The series portrays Ivan as a pious statesman who cares about his people and their well-being. The ideological message of the series manifests itself in such verbiage as "If I am gone, Rus is gone" and "There can be no state without a tsar." The just and handsome tsar is shown to be a benevolent ruler who never ordered his oprichniks to kill simple folk. If his men commit these crimes, they are made to pay, but the Russians know that their tsar "never punishes innocent people." Instead of denouncing the horrors of the oprichnina as they did in reality, foreigners at Ivan's court celebrate his rule as more just than that of any other contemporary European monarch. Yet all the foreigners are later exposed as traitors.

Another TV series, *Sofia* (Artyom Vasilyev, 2016), which was sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Culture, tells the story of Ivan the Terrible's grandmother, Sofia Paleologue, a Byzantine princess who married Ivan III, grand prince of Moscow. Notably, the story is framed as an Orthodox priest's account to the young Ivan of his ancestors and family traditions: the story begins with their conversation and ends with a grandiose portrayal of Ivan IV's coronation. The melodramatic love story between the Russian prince and the Byzantine princess showcases the exemplary relations in the tsar's family, drawing a veil over Sophia's rivalry with Elena Stefanovna (1465–1505), the widow of Ivan the Young (Ivan Molodoy, 1458–1490, Ivan III's son from his first marriage). The series shows Ivan the Young being poisoned by his wife Elena (both she and Dmitry Ivanovich (1483–1509), her son by Ivan the Young, were imprisoned and killed, supposedly on orders from Ivan III). And, as in the Daruga offering, in *Sofia* most of the foreigners eventually reveal their nature as murderous traitors.

The series *Godunov* (Alexey Andryanov, Timur Alpatov, 2018), produced by the state-run Moskino and aired on Channel One Russia, gives us an Ivan the Terrible as a wise and prayerful old man. There are no scenes of torture or execution, and no trace of terror. Malyuta Skuratov, the terror's main perpetrator, appears here as a good family man, a warrior, and Boris Godunov's respectable father-in-law. Dedicated to the memory of film director Stanislav Govorukhin, a notorious nationalist, the series represents Moscow as the Third Rome and all Russian tsars as sage statesmen. The only antagonist is the imposter Grigory Otrepyev, who usurps the throne by pretending to be Tsarevich Dmitry (1582–1591), Ivan's son by his seventh wife. That the role of Otrepev was given to Evgeny Tkachuk, who is very similar in looks to Iwan Rheon (Ramsey Bolton in *Game of Thrones*) and who clearly imitates Bolton's demeanor, character, and gestures, and is also shown in scenes of sexual violence, suggests that the creators wanted to take advantage of the popularity of *Game of Thrones*, which was as widely viewed in Russia as in the rest of the world.

Terrible, another TV series also created by Alexey Andryanov and Moskino, aired on Channel One Russia in 2020. Its synopsis resonates strongly with the gist of a book on Ivan IV published in 2018 by Dmitry Volodikhin, a nationalist activist and professor of history at Moscow State University (discussed in Chapter 3):

> A tsar born to rule grew up an orphan, enduring oppression and humiliation from his boyars. A tsar striving to establish unified and inviolable authority in Rus was repeatedly betrayed by his closest associates, and having gained a great love, he lost it in the gloom of conspiracies and intrigues. *Terrible* is the story of a ruler who experienced great victories and great defeats.[43]

These monuments, films, and other undertakings do not, however, exhaust the fervor for Tsar Ivan; his idealization continues into academia. I will consider the historiography of his reign in another chapter, but the government's support for these academic initiatives does rate a mention here. On October 16–17, 2017, "The Epoch of Ivan the Terrible and Its Expression in Historiography, Writing, Art, Architecture," a conference sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and the Russian Academy of Sciences, was held at the Alexandrovo Sloboda State Historical-Architectural and Artistic Museum-Reserve, "to celebrate the 470th anniversary of Ivan IV's coronation."[44] In the same year, an Orthodox-Church-sponsored, Russia-wide exhibition, dubbed a "history park" and titled "Russia – My History," was held in twenty-three provincial Russian cities. It represented Ivan IV as a great state leader who was libeled by foreigners seeking to promote their own political agendas. The exhibition was organized by Tikhon (Georgii) Shevkunov, metropolitan of Pskov and Porkhov, who is an especially active advocate of Ivan the Terrible and the oprichnina.[45] In 2021, the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library in St Petersburg, together with the city of

Vologda, filmed the documentary *Ivan the Terrible and the Vologda Fortress,* designed to "counter the [negative] myths about Ivan the Terrible."[46]

Unsurprisingly, Putin too felt compelled to voice his approval of Ivan the Terrible, most notably on July 14, 2017, when he claimed, contrary to undeniable historical evidence, that "most likely, Ivan the Terrible never killed anyone, not even his son."[47] The source of Putin's historical information was arguably the writings of Ivan Snychov (1927–1995), the secular name of Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, founder of tsarebozhie, which venerates, among all else, Ivan the Terrible and his oprichnina.[48] The main idea of this movement is the sacralization of the Russian tsars, who are deemed not merely emissaries for but actually incarnations of God. Tsarebozhie denies the principle of harmony between the Russian secular state and the Orthodox Church, elevating the Russian Orthodox tsar to absolute dominance over the Church.

Medieval Mobilization: Alexander Nevsky, Prince Vladimir of Kyiv, and Prince Igor

Ivan the Terrible is not the only medieval warlord promoted by the Kremlin. Alexander Nevsky (1221–1263), prince of Novgorod, is another favorite of Russian propaganda. In the Russian tradition, his name evokes thoughts of the victory over the Teutonic knights on Chudskoe Lake (supposedly on April 5, 1242). He is further renowned for his historic victory over foreign invaders on the River Neva (hence his sobriquet, Nevsky).[49] Yet Nevsky also ruled Novgorod on behalf of the Mongols and was installed as the Grand Prince of Vladimir by the Mongols, whose invasion of Rus from 1237 to 1240 and subsequent subjugation of almost all Rus remains in the Russian historical memory a roster of tragic atrocities. Nevsky is known to have paid tribute to the Mongols and suppressed his compatriots' attempts to rise against them. For all that, though, Nevsky, a local saint in Novgorod, was canonized in 1547 under Ivan IV, who used the Nevsky cult to legitimize his own reign. Later, Peter I also enlisted Nevsky, transferring his ashes to the Alexander Nevsky Lavra (Monastery) in his new capital of St. Petersburg, in commemoration of his victory over Sweden in the Northern War (1700–1721).

The Soviet historical memory of the prince was heavily influenced by the Stalinist movie *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), produced by Sergei Eisenstein and starring Nikolay Cherkasov in the title role. In this movie, Prince Nevsky, a father of his people, handily destroys Russia's enemies from the West. Stalin also invoked Nevsky in a November 1941 address to Russian troops, seeking to inspire them with the prince's example of patriotism and courage.[50]

In the post-Soviet period, the functioning of Alexander Nevsky's image in the Russian context paralleled the role played by Ukrainian historical figures, such as Bogdan Khmelnitsky (especially as portrayed in Ihor Savchenko's 1941 film of the same name) and Danilo of Halych.[51] Nevsky did not attract much attention among Putin's ideologists until December 2008, when the viewers of the TV show *Name of Russia: Historical Choice* voted Stalin "the most

important state leader of the past." Allegedly to avoid a scandal, Nevsky was chosen instead,[52] as an ostensibly "politically neutral" symbol of Russian military glory and a convenient cover to mask Stalin's rising popularity (an outcome of the re-Stalinization campaign which we will examine in Chapter 6).

This is how Nevsky's role in Russian memory politics is described by Alexey Sirenov, Director of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of History:

> As you remember, Stalin led [the popularity ratings – D.Kh.] for a long time. And it created a real social conflict. Alexander Nevsky is a zone of consensus. This figure does not cause fierce controversy […]. He has, after all, been revered since the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries, that being 800 years of quite active historical memory: he was canonized, places of worship have been named after him, he has been depicted on icons. […] He is encoded in our memory.[53]

In 2014, the year of the annexation of Crimea, Putin announced his plan to celebrate Nevsky's 800th anniversary in 2021 – a sign that the Kremlin recognized Nevsky's potential for its neomedieval memory politics. In 2017, Patriarch Kirill clearly articulated the anti-Western interpretation of Nevsky so dear to Stalin, thus further boosting the prince's image in the minds of post-Soviet mnemo-technologists. To Kirill, "those who tried to control Russia from the East were interested in our purses, while those who tried to control us from the West were interested in our souls. […] Russia did not lose its identity in the aftermath of captivity by the Horde, it did not lose its faith, it didn't even lose its state structure." In contrast, if anyone like the crusaders had succeeded in conquering it, "Rus as a historical, cultural, spiritual phenomenon would have ceased to exist."[54]

The list of events for the Nevsky celebrations in 2021 included transporting his ashes across Russia, several conferences, publications, and a number of public events honoring him in Ekaterinburg, Ruza, Astrakhan, Veliky Novgorod, Kamensk-Uralsky, and Vladimir.[55] Addressing attendees of a major historical conference devoted to Nevsky, Putin called him "a great son of our Fatherland."[56] A 30-meter-tall monument to him on the shore of Chudskoe Lake was unveiled on September 11, 2021. This installation comes with a special agenda, since, according to its creators, "it will be visible in Estonia,"[57] a transparent allusion to the alleged animosity of NATO member Estonia to Russia. A church dedicated to Nevsky was consecrated in Volgograd in 2021, and one more construction was announced in Verkhnyaya Pyshma.[58] A less controversial figure than Ivan the Terrible though still a medieval prince, Nevsky's image has proven more than capable of promoting the same neomedieval values. He belongs to the same neomedieval imagery as Ivan the Terrible but, as a canonized saint who fought against the much-hated West and whose repressions left no trace in historical memory comparable to that of the oprichnina, is less divisive.

In early August 2022, Russian occupiers demolished a monument to the Ukrainian defenders in the city of Mariupol. Soon after, plans were announced to replace it with a statue of Alexander Nevsky. Shortly before that, the Russian nationalist website Regnum had published an article entitled "New Assault on Rus: What Unites the Battle of the Neva and the Special Operation in Ukraine," which favorably compared Putin to his medieval predecessor. Depicting Putin's "special operation in Ukraine" as part of a war that the West has waged against Russia since the Middle Ages, the article warned that "the Fatherland is in danger," and described both Nevsky and Putin as "national leaders" around whom the Russian people should rally.[59]

In the course of the war in Ukraine, yet another medieval prince was enlisted by Russian propaganda. On November 21, 2022, Medinsky, in his capacity as presidential aide, and Sergei Kirienko, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the presidential administration, unveiled a monument to Prince Igor (1151–1202) in occupied Luhansk.[60] A symbolic figure for Russian nationalism, Igor is the hero of *The Lay of Igor's Campaign* (an epic poem whose medieval authenticity has been questioned) and of the eponymous patriotic opera, jointly composed by Alexander Borodin, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, and Alexander Glazunov and first performed in 1880. His image has traditionally symbolized the notion of national unity.

Speaking at the unveiling ceremony, Medinsky commended Igor as a Russian patriot and eminent military leader. But there was a subtext to this ostensibly innocuous assertion. Igor ruled the small town of Novgorod-Seversky in north-eastern Ukraine, which had been briefly occupied by Russian forces early in the 2022 invasion. The prince's 1185 campaign against the Cumans (known as the Polovtsy in Russia) ended in defeat not far from the city of Izyum, which at the time of writing had recently been freed from occupation by Ukrainian forces. Thus, celebrating Igor as a Russian prince and extolling his military valor is virtually tantamount to declaring Eastern Ukraine a historic part of Russia.

To this list of medieval warlords honored in Putin's Russia, we must add yet one more. On November 4, 2016, a 17.5-meter-tall monument to Prince Vladimir, the tenth-century ruler of the Kievan Rus best known for his adoption of Orthodox Christianity in 988, was placed in front of the Moscow Kremlin. Vladimir, a Viking prince, did indeed convert his subjects to Orthodoxy, so that he could marry Princess Anna, sister of the Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII. But some observers further interpreted the erection of this monument as a celebration of the annexation of Crimea. At the dedication ceremony, Putin said:

> Prince Vladimir will forever be remembered as a gatherer and defender of the Russian lands – a farsighted politician who laid the foundations of a strong, unitary, centralized state that unified mutually equal peoples, languages, cultures, and religions into one large family.[61]

The film *Viking* (Andrei Kravchuk), also produced in 2016, throws further light on this monument's agenda. It tells the story of Vladimir and his conquest of Korsun (the Slavic name of Chersonesus, an ancient Greek city once situated close to modern-day Sevastopol in Crimea). In that movie, Prince Vladimir is a noble and fearless warrior and a wise leader, who conquers Korsun, adopts Christianity, and baptizes his people. The militant watchword of this neomedieval propaganda movie – "To Korsun We Go!" – is reminiscent of the infamous 2014 "Crimea Is Ours!" campaign. It echoes Putin's justification for the annexation of Crimea, which he referred to as "Korsun, where Prince Vladimir was baptized prior to baptizing Rus" in his address to the Federal Assembly on December 4, 2014.[62] The raising of a monument to Vladimir near the Kremlin could be viewed as an attempt to present him as a Russian rather than a Ukrainian ruler and even to outshine the famous monument to the prince on St. Vladimir Hill in the center of Kyiv.[63]

Neomedievalism in Abundance

These medieval rulers do not exhaust the full scope of the neomedieval themes that inspire post-Soviet filmmakers. Various moments of Russian medieval history that showcase Russian valor and rebrand in a heroic light the most tragic and shameful episodes of Russian history are too numerous to count. Among them, *The Legend of Kolovrat* (Ivan Shurkhovetsky, Dzhanik Fayziev, 2017, known in the West as *Furious*), an epic action film, tells the tale of Ryazan warrior Evpaty Kolovrat, and the thirteenth-century siege and destruction of Ryazan by Batu Khan, which was the beginning of the two-centuries-long Tatar yoke. *Furious*, which was funded from the federal budget through the Fond Kino state agency, openly idealizes Kolovrat and his contemporaries, the lifeways of ancient Rus, and the medieval social order.[64] *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the official newspaper of the Russian government, advertised it as Russia's first superhero movie, and other mainstream media were also lavish in their praise.[65]

Vladimir Medinsky himself was moved to write a novel on Russia's Middle Ages, whose title, *The Wall* (2012), echoes a pamphlet written by Mikhail Yuriev that I will address later in this chapter. The plot revolves around the 1609 siege of Smolensk by Polish king Sigismund III. Here the West, represented by Poland and Lithuania, is cowardly and perfidious, and the heroine, daughter of the Smolensk commander, is murdered by a traitor who has sold his motherland out to Poland. In 2018, Dmitry Miskhiev produced a movie under the same title, which follows the Medinsky novel's plot quite closely. Medinsky, then-minister of culture, promptly disavowed that film.[66]

The Infourok internet platform, the "number one resource for Russian secondary education," whose target audience is both teachers and schoolchildren, praises Ivan IV and other medieval princes, promotes tsarebozhie dogmas, and cites Snychov and Ivan Ilyin as authoritative sources.[67] Obviously, some historians oppose the neomedieval propaganda, but they are outliers to the prevailing trendline.

Neomedieval memory politics also encompasses several legislative initiatives. In 2004, National Unity Day replaced the Soviet tradition of commemorating the October Revolution on November 7th. This new state holiday, celebrated on November 4th, memorializes "the liberation from the Polish occupation of 1612" that ended the catastrophic period known as the Time of Troubles (an outcome of Ivan the Terrible's policies), which was marked by Russia's defeat in the Livonian war (1558–1583), social unrest, the devastation of several areas of Muscovy, and large-scale famine. While hinting that Putin's coming to power terminated the "Time of Troubles" of the 1990s (as Putin's propaganda presents the period of liberal reforms), this holiday stresses the continuity between Russian tsardom and the post-Soviet regime.[68] By incorporating its imperial traditions and presenting Poland as Russia's enemy, it transports neomedievalism to the center of the regime's history politics.

In 2020, the mention of God and reference to "Russia's millennial history" were amended in the Russian Constitution to underscore the connection between Russia's medieval past and its present. It laid down a claim on Ukraine, where the history of Rus began, in the vicinity of Kyiv, asserting it to have been an integral part of Russia ever since the Middle Ages. Putin expressed these same ideas in a 2021 article that invoked Russia's medieval past at length, solely to intimate the extent to which Russia and Ukraine "are the same people." But Putin's preoccupation with medieval history is, and long has been, a constant: for him, even COVID-19 inspired neomedieval allusions.[69]

Several memory laws originally intended to criminalize criticism of the Kremlin's official version of World War II have acquired a broader meaning that has rendered them suitable for penalizing "disrespect" of Russia's medieval warlords, by effectively equating them with "the heroic Soviet soldiers."[70]

Importantly, Russian state officials consider criticism of Russia's medieval history and its rulers as part of an "information war" waged by the West against Russia and, hence, deleterious to Russia's state interests. This conspiracy theory, which has been actively promoted by Medinsky, also played a significant role in justifying the praise of Ivan the Terrible and Alexander Nevsky. Beginning with his 2011 doctoral dissertation on foreign accounts dating to the Muscovite period (including the reign of Ivan the Terrible), Medinsky has consistently claimed that foreigners libeled the "great tsar," purposefully distorted his image, and misinterpreted his rule.[71]

Medinsky's dissertation, which was met with accusations of plagiarism and disregard for the standards of academic inquiry,[72] claimed that the "majority of [foreign] memoirs were written on the orders of Western government circles" and therefore could not be considered objective or reliable historical sources.[73] Ivan the Terrible and his oprichnina were, in his view, the prime targets of this Western war of words, which, in the sixteenth century no less than today, had the goal of bringing about the dissolution of the Russian state.[74] The theory

that Western medieval sources dwelt in such detail on the oprichnina's tortures and executions and Ivan's participation in them by way of "dehumanizing the Russians" has since taken firm root in post-Soviet publications.[75]

The question of the extent to which neomedieval politics, including the attempts to rehabilitate Ivan IV, influences Russian public opinion remains difficult to answer, given that no independent sociological surveys regarding Ivan have been conducted since 2016. However, it may confidently be asserted that over the past twenty years it has had some success in changing the tsar's image. And the dynamics of those changes track closely with the modified perceptions of Stalin, which will be discussed in Chapter 6. According to sociological surveys, Ivan the Terrible was not even in the top ten of historical leaders in the 1980s and 1990s.[76] But in the 2000s, he broke that barrier, taking tenth place in the roster of famous Russian leaders compiled by the TV show *Name of Russia: Historical Choice* in 2008. By 2016, according to the Levada Center, 53% of respondents were in favor of the equestrian monument in Oryol, with only 19% against it. Further, about half the respondents agreed that Ivan "did more good than bad for Russia." Significantly, 60% characterized him as the first Russian tsar and only 20% as "a cruel tyrant."[77] His name was being searched on Yandex.ru some 200,000 times per month at the time of writing.[78]

The omnipresence of medieval references in post-Soviet culture may provide another indicator of neomedievalism's success.[79] Tellingly, the medieval word *kholop* has resurfaced in colloquial Russian over recent decades as a designator of the man in the street and has gained significant popularity. Kholop, a social term dating back to *Russkaya pravda*, Russia's twelfth century legal codex, signified a serf who could be killed at will by his master, had no rights, and could possess no property.[80] Prior to the post-Soviet era, it was, not surprisingly, used as a borderline slur but was never part of the political discourse. Under Putin's regime, however, it has effectively become almost synonymous with "citizen," so that now sallies on the lines of "Are we kholops or taxpayers?" abound in social media and journalism.[81] Government officials also seem to enjoy calling themselves "the seigneur's people" (*lyudi gosudarevy*), thus positioning themselves as a new nobility and freeing them from responsibility for presidential decisions.[82]

Russian cultural figures often revert to neomedieval terminology in their critiques of Putinism. Cult musician Yury Shevchuk, famed for his anti-war songs and public spectacles, objected at a meeting between members of the Russian intelligentsia and Putin that Russia had become

> a society of estates, as it was for thousands of years. There are princes and boyars riding in cars with flashing lights, and there is an estate of serfs [*tyaglovy narod*, literally "burdened people," who were heavily taxed, in cash or labor – D.Kh.]. The gap between them is huge.[83]

The famous post-Soviet writer Vladimir Sorokin, author of *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006) and *Sugar Kremlin* (2008), explained the political meaning and the relevance of medieval social terminology in this way:

> I would call our current regime "feudalism." The feudal mentality has not disappeared in Russia, and the authorities are actively using it for their own purposes. Ivan the Terrible built a pyramid of Russian rule, and it survives to this day. In Soviet times, it bore the slogan "Our goal is communism!" Today, it is embellished with high tech. But its core remains the same: the president feels like sovereign, a governor like a feudal lord, a securocrat like an oprichnik, and a citizen like a kholop.[84]

In another interview, Sorokin invoked this theme again:

> Everyone's talking about the barbarities [Russia is committing in Ukraine], these medieval methods of war. […] It's all because the Russian state hasn't really changed since the Middle Ages, the time of Ivan the Terrible.[85]

Prominent writer Victor Pelevin adds another layer of meaning by having his protagonist in *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2004) spell out why the parallels between Putinism and the Russian imperial period, so fashionable in the 2000s, do not work, while those with the Russian Middle Ages perform very well, highlighting the primitivizing of government and the degradation of the state in the post-Soviet period:

> The Russian authorities had a certain tendency towards kitsch: they were always attempting to issue themselves a charter of nobility and pass themselves off as the glorious descendants of empire with all its history and culture – despite the fact that they had about as much in common with the old Russia as some Lombards grazing their goats amid the ruins of the Forum had with the Flavian dynasty. […] The problem was probably a wrong choice of period for the references. They should have gone for feudal chronicles, not imperial eagles. That time would offer better markers: Boris [Yeltsin] Big Nest, Vladimir [Putin] Red Security Pass.[86]

When Pelevin wrote these lines, the neomedieval surge was just beginning to gain momentum in Russia.

Political protests against Putinism are often framed in neomedieval terms, which is another indication of the centrality of neomedieval memory politics in Russian life. The anti-Putin movement of 2012 was conceptualized as a protest against a "society of orders" or "society of estates" (a system of generationally rigid social groups with varying rights and duties).[87] Alexey Navalny formulated a standout slogan – "He is not our tsar!" – for the major anti-Putin protest held on May 5, 2018.[88] In 2016, *gazeta.ru*, an official government news

site, anticipated that "the new Russian nobility, boyars, and kholops" would soon find themselves under resentful scrutiny in 2018.[89] (That said, the Russian tolerance for Putinism has proven stronger than the newspaper expected.)

The oprichnina, which has become a fertile metaphor for Putinism, figures prominently among the protestors' slogans. On December 28, 2008, for example, the art group *Voina* (War) organized a protest at The Oprichnik, Mikhail Leontiev's restaurant in Moscow. Leontiev, an ardent Putinist and member of the Izborsky Club, is a political commentator on Channel One Russia, hosts a talk show and the internet portal *Odnako* ("However"), and is advisor to the CEO of the Russian oil company Rosneft. *Voina* called him "the alpha-dog of Putin's oprichnina."[90]

Foreshadowing the protest movement of 2011 to 2012, an online petition published in March 2010 and titled "Putin Must Go" labeled Dmitry Medvedev "Simeon Bekbulatovich" – a reference to Ivan the Terrible's jester-tsar that set forth then-President Medvedev as a mere placeholder for Putin, then Prime Minister. In 2012, journalist Oleg Kashin named the Security Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, and the FSB "the new oprichnina."[91] The oprichnina has also figured in discussions of the absence of reliable property rights in post-Soviet Russia, implying that Russia has not improved in this respect since the Middle Ages.[92] In 2021, opposition media characterized the closure of the International Memorial Society as a return of the Middle Ages.

The leaders of the Russian opposition employ medieval metaphors to highlight the danger of anti-democratic developments in Russia. In one of his last interviews, Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader murdered in 2015, said that Putin "is pushing my country back to the Middle Ages."[93] After his murder, his daughter Zhanna Nemtsova used the same formula to denounce Putin's repressive regime.[94] Mikhail Khodorkovsky describes Russia's situation in very nearly the same terms: "The regime is shoving Russian society back into the Middle Ages."[95]

Neomedieval Social Projects for Russia

Putin's run for a second presidential term and his reelection in March 2004 prompted an unprecedented mobilization of far-right political forces. Putin and his cronies came to power without an ideology: they were all about corruption and were relying on Orthodoxy to fill the ideological vacuum left after the collapse of both Marxism and the West-oriented liberal ideology. Banned under the Soviets[96] and having rapidly recovered its influence after the collapse of communism, Russian Orthodoxy had actively tried, in the 1990s, to occupy with its dogmas this ideological vacuum. However, the Church failed in its bid to become the ideological leader of a multi-confessional country. The search for an ideology naturally oriented Putin and his clique toward extreme-right forces, which offered unsophisticated ideas that they could easily grasp.

Far-right pamphlets and projects written for the sole purpose of grabbing Putin's attention flooded the presidential administration from 2004. Foundational to post-Soviet neomedievalism, they posited a return to the Middle Ages as a social and political goal for Russia and proposed the restoration of the social structures of medieval Rus. While the Russian far right's geopolitical claims and the threats they present to international peace have been the object of many studies, their projects for the country's population at large and the vision of Russia's social structure have rarely come under scrutiny. I will address that lacuna here.

In 2004, Mikhail Yuriev, whom the reader will remember from the Preface, presented an analytical paper titled *Fortress Russia* with the subtitle *A Construct for the President*. [97] The paper offered an extreme nationalist and anti-liberal project for Russia, calling for isolationism in Russian politics and economics, naming the West as Russia's primordial enemy, arguing for the reconstruction of the Soviet Empire, and insisting on the need for a nationalistic propaganda campaign to expedite these measures:

> Our country is an unassailable fortress! Provided it is not surrendered without a fight to a Fifth Column. We have every reason for optimism! Provided we rid ourselves of those maniacal reformers. A great future awaits us! Provided the supreme power finally rids itself of the "liberalism" that is so hated by the Russian people.[98]

In the form of political counsel to Putin, Yuriev spells out the core notions of the International Eurasian Movement, with which he was closely associated, namely, Russian imperialism, isolationism, and the rejection of Western democracy.[99] His pamphlet scandalized liberally minded intellectuals, but the presidential administration may well have read it closely.[100]

In *Fortress Russia*, Yuriev develops the ideas of Alexander Dugin, one of Russia's most notorious right-wing ideologists, who has become especially well-known in the West due to the assassination of his daughter. Dugin's career began in Yury Mamleev's neo-fascist circle, which logically led him to join forces with ultra-nationalist writer Eduard Limonov in creating the Russian National-Bolshevik party and promoting fascism consistently throughout the 1990s.[101] In his *Fourth Political Theory*, Dugin presents National Bolshevism as an alternative to "the classical form of communism," National Socialism, liberalism, and fascism. In his description, however, National Bolshevism actually shares many traits with fascism.[102] National Bolshevism, he states, combines "socialism without materialism, atheism, progressivism, or modernism" with "a modified Third Way" (read: fascism). And he insists on the need "to put aside anti-communist, as well as anti-fascist, prejudices," which "are instruments in the hands of liberals and globalists to keep their enemies divided."[103]

Dugin and other admirers of the fascist ideology and symbolism were marginal to the Russian political mainstream under Boris Yeltsin's presidency. But

toward its end, in the late 1990s, new opportunities opened to them. To seize those opportunities, however, Russian neo-fascists could no longer openly stand beneath the banners of the Third Reich. Nor would National Bolshevism be likely to find supporters among the post-Soviet elites that had rallied to promote the Stalinist myth of the Great Patriotic War as a leading theme in Russia's official propaganda. In those days, the cult of the Great Victory emerged as the main unifying symbol of the anti-democratic forces, which problematized the open advocacy of fascism or Nazism but not far-right extremism per se.

Dugin and Pavel Zarifullin organized the first Pan-Eurasian Nationalism conference in 1998, during Dugin's final days with Limonov's National-Bolshevik Party.[104] The word "Eurasianism" provided Dugin and his followers with a false intellectual genealogy, helping them preserve the essence of their neo-fascist views and make inroads into the new political class.[105] Jointly with other representatives of the far right, the leaders of the Neo-Eurasian movement who had opposed Yeltsin during his presidency became part of the ideological establishment in the Putin regime.[106] In 1999, Dugin became Gennady Seleznev's advisor in the Duma. (Seleznev, Chair of the State Duma and a leader of the Communist Party, which abandoned most of its Marxist traditions in the 1990s, morphing into what was essentially a nationalist and populist party, had harbored presidential ambitions before Putin's rise to power.) At the same time, Dugin launched *Eurasian Intervention* as a supplement in *Zavtra*, Alexander Prokhanov's ultra-nationalist newspaper. Later, Dugin became advisor to another Duma chair, Sergey Naryshkin.

Nikita Mikhalkov had arguably been the first to recognize Eurasianism's potential in the post-Soviet context. Dugin's grip on the word, however, proved stronger, although even in the late 1990s, when Dugin had already rebranded himself, his understanding of Eurasian ideas remained very superficial.[107]

The Eurasian émigré thinkers had opposed Russian chauvinism and imperial ambitions. Even less did they support the apocalyptic vision of the future that is, as will be shown in the Conclusion, central for Dugin and his creed. In the 2000s, he discovered several fascist or near-fascist theorists among Russian émigrés, such as Ivan Ilyin, whose views are closer to Dugin than the views of the Eurasiansts. Although it was, of course, too late for a second rebranding of Dugin's movement by that time, Ilyin left profound traces on the social program of neo-Eurasianism.

Neo-Eurasianism calls for a rebirth of medieval Russian society and, echoing Nikolay Berdyaev, for a return to "the New Russian Middle Ages."[108] A comparison of Berdyaev's treatise with the neo-Eurasians' social project reveals both a continuity and significant differences between them. In a typical denunciation of modernity, Berdyaev harshly criticizes the political atomism of modern democracy and opposes it to the "organic" medieval social hierarchy that is central to his thinking. He imagines that in the New Middle Ages, political parties will have no role in representing the people's will.[109] The parliaments, those embryos of democracy, should be dissolved.[110] Professional guilds and corporations will

replace the medieval estates, and representatives of those bodies will rule this "people-centered" society in which the peasantry is foremost.[111] Further, no prosperity is possible without a spiritual aristocracy. Therefore, since power is essentially hierarchical by nature and people have to be ruled, the masses may wish to establish a monarchy. But, being also critical of modern constitutional monarchies, Berdyaev models this purported monarchy after the medieval monarchy, leavened with "some features of Caesarism."[112]

Once granted dictatorial power, the monarch will rule the guilds and corporations. As in Thomas More's *Utopia*, Berdyaev's society has no leisure classes because humanity's overall economic level will fall and everyone will need to work. But, contrary to More's vision, Berdyaev's utopia contains no slaves. Religion is accorded a central place in social and cultural life, this being the only way to salvage a society based on "degenerate" European principles. The anti-intellectualism and obscurantism typical of Russian religious philosophy in general are also salient in his thinking: magic, the occult, and gnosticism are to replace science, given that even machinery is imbued with "a hidden magic."[113]

Berdyaev's treatise was perceived as just another eccentricity from a marginal philosopher, and few took it seriously in terms of a political program until neo-Eurasianism commandeered his ideas. Dugin, who often muses about Russia's unique transition from modern history to the New Middle Ages, appropriates Berdyaev's notion that Russia never left the Middle Ages entirely behind. Yet while he often quotes Berdyaev in his writings, Dugin's ideas about an "existential Middle Ages" bear only a superficial resemblance to Berdyaev's.[114] He ignores Berdyaev's distaste for fascism and exaggerates his mysticism, by coupling Berdyaev's ideas with the neo-fascist theories of René Guénon and the fascist mystic Julius Evola. Dugin relishes the gnostic elements of proto-fascism, including "a recreation of Tradition from its initiatory nucleus," the vulgar romanticism of "mystery, miracle, and twilight, a free transition from wakefulness to dreaming," and so forth.[115]

Fascist inspirations are in full possession of Dugin's mind as he speculates that "true freedom can be achieved only in a totalitarian society" and that "people fully enjoy life only when they are threatened by the axe of a merciful executioner."[116] He reads openly fascist overtones into Berdyaev's hierarchical society, attributing to him a cult of "heroes and high priests who will rule this society."[117] But contrary to Berdyaev, the neo-Eurasian social project is not limited to the creation of new guilds and a strong social hierarchy. Indeed, for neo-Eurasians, the reconstruction of the feudal society of Ancient Rus culminates in the creation of a caste-based society. Claiming that "equality is impossible [and] only corpses are equal," the neo-Eurasian discourse expands the societal importance of estates and castes, which terms are used synonymously.[118] Dugin argues that the caste structure is the best match for human nature:

> Ancient states and sociopolitical systems were built upon the caste principle. This presupposes a doctrine according to which people's inner nature

> differs: there are godlike souls and earthly souls (the latter being animalistic and demonic). The caste system reflects the nature of souls, which people cannot alter in their lifetime. Belonging to caste is dictated by fate. Normal society should be built in such a way as to have people of a godlike nature (the elite) on top and people of animalistic or demonic nature (the masses) at the bottom.[119]

Dugin maintains that the middle class is a liberal, capitalist phenomenon, no less alien to Russia than many other manifestations of Westernization.[120] He fantasizes that in the course of history, "the caste system was replaced first by estates and then by classes."[121] But, since Dugin does not consider Russia a Western society, he deems the transition from estate monarchy to democracy that occurred in the West irrelevant to Russia and holds that, even where it has come about, this does not change the basic principle of "the caste inequality of souls," which may be altered only by a signal feat of heroism on the part of an individual.[122] (So can "caste inequality" be changed by the individual or does it "reflect the nature of souls, which people cannot alter in their lifetime"? Dugin, like other of Putin's propagandists, appears unconcerned by contradictions such as this.)

Dugin praises the social hierarchy, which he considers essential to the fascist state: "The essence of fascism consists in creating a new social hierarchy, which is built upon natural, organic, and clear principles: honor, self-respect, heroism, and masculinity." Therefore, "tsar-philosophers and hero-warriors" should hold sway over the middle class, which will fall to the bottom of the social hierarchy.

A society of estates, "where everyone knows his place and where he belongs," as Dugin phrased it in one state-sponsored TV program, is alluring not only to his neo-Eurasian followers but also to other members of the Izborsky Club, who have even been known to romanticize slavery, for example:[123]

> Our warriors – Slavs, Goths, Turks – were people who became rulers because of their bravery and military competence, their justice, and their goodwill. In our tradition, slaves were war hostages who were disarmed and lived together with their masters. Later they could be released for a fee or returned home. Often, they became members of their "masters'" families.[124]

It is clear from this review that the neo-Eurasian vision of Russia's social structure cannot be viewed as a simple return to the nineteenth-century Slavophile ideology. The Slavophiles – for example, Alexander Koshelev, Ivan Aksakov, and Yury Samarin – advocated for the abolition of serfdom and actively participated in Alexander II's reforms.[125] Their abolitionist views differ profoundly from those of the contemporary neo-Eurasians and post-Soviet monarchists. In many ways, Dugin's rhetoric is more reminiscent of nineteenth-century German occultists, the forerunners of fascism and heroes of his political youth, than of Slavophiles, Berdyaev, or the Eurasian thinkers.

The neo-Eurasian doctrine is far from marginal in post-Soviet Russia.[126] Mark Sedgwick points out that neo-Eurasianism owes its current popularity to the support of intellectuals and political scientists[127] (while failing to reference the political support it receives from the Russian authorities). Since the mid-2000s, the neo-Eurasian movement has been able to profit from impressive, albeit usually indirect, political leverage.[128] On several occasions, Putin has called Eurasianism an important part of Russian ideology, a founding principle of the Eurasian Union (Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan), and "a tradition of our political thought," and has tasked the ruling party, United Russia, to "propagate Eurasian ideas among the Russian people at large."[129] RIA-Novosti, Russia's official news agency, openly proclaimed "the heritage of Eurasian thinking" a "new ideology" that represents Russia as a country and civilization.[130] The neo-Eurasian movement has even assumed the role of the Kremlin's proxy in its reaction to a number of political events such as the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, and has been instrumental in solidifying popular support for the Kremlin's policies.[131]

Neo-Eurasianists have not, however, been alone in presenting Putin with neomedievalist social projects. In the spring of 2005, the first volume of *Project Russia*, an anonymous political pamphlet, was delivered by government courier to the presidential administration, the government, the General Staff, the FSB, the Interior Ministry, the prosecutor's office, and the State Duma to read.[132] Later, it was included in the list of books recommended for state officials.[133] Nikita Mikhalkov, journalist Alexander Khinstein (now a Duma member), and the popular newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* spared no effort in promoting it. In 2006, the Olma Press publishing house issued 50,000 copies, and in 2009, Eksmo – Russia's largest commercial publisher – ran 1,000,000 more. Yuriev was one of *Project Russia*'s authors.[134]

From its outset, the pamphlet strikes an apocalyptic note: the West, and more precisely the USA, wants to "destroy the world" and especially Russia. The West's anti-Russia conspiracy is a matter of extreme urgency. Yuriev's image of a besieged fortress, which clearly has strong medieval connotations and typifies the far-right imagination in many countries, emerges in the first pages of *Project Russia*: "Stable rule is the last fortress standing in the enemy's path. Once it falls, the way to [Western] world domination will open up."[135] Calling on Russia to reclaim its imperial glory and on Eastern countries to support Russia in its fight against the US, the authors compare the current situation to 1941, when the USSR was attacked by Nazi Germany. From the vantage point of today, those statements look a lot like Putin's current war propaganda writ small. On February 27, the first Sunday after the war with Ukraine began, guests on Vladimir Solovyoev's talk show, *Sunday Evening with Solovyoev*, called the invasion in Ukraine "our 1941" – while Russian forces were bombing Kyiv, exactly as the Nazis had in 1941.

While *Project Russia* sets unambiguous imperial goals for Russian foreign policy and places the restoration of the empire among its top priorities, its main

focus is on the social re-organization of Russia.[136] The authors' social ideas and their animosity to the West and to liberal democracy all but close any remaining gap between them and the neo-Eurasians. In the face of danger from the West, the entire Russian nation is called upon to unite around an autocratic regime. The authors propose "a new principle of state organization" that combines "the best characteristics of the monarchy with the best features of the Soviet system." The recreation of the Soviet Empire is, for instance, to be accompanied by the restoration of a theocratic monarchy ("an improved monarchy is the future"[137]) and the restoration of a society of estates:

> Tsardom is not a bloody dictatorship, and its ruler is not an executioner. Tsardom embodies the principle of autocracy [...] which exists in every vigorous social structure. [...] Ivan the Terrible ruled for thirty-seven years; other great autocrats also ruled about that long. The time of the firm rule of unchanging tsars increased and strengthened Russia.

A strict social hierarchy is the most "appropriate" form of social organization when people are deemed mentally underdeveloped and incapable of taking care of themselves: "As adults protect children from cold and hunger, so the honest elite should protect the people from predators." In the upshot, a "harmonious society" emerges, in which the socially established "elders" protect and take care of the socially disadvantaged "youngsters."[138]

Much like Dugin, the authors of *Project Russia* employ medieval metaphors, which inform their thinking about society. They compare society to a human body (a popular medieval way of representing the social hierarchy) and describe the relations between the monarch and the people as those of a husband and his wife and/or a father and his family. The social pyramid, dominated by princes and warriors who protect the peasants and other incompetents, is another medieval analogy widely used in this pamphlet.[139]

The authors argue that "the people are always slaves."[140] Like the neo-Eurasians, they think that social equality is not only undesirable but impossible, for there will always be "those who lead and those who are led."[141] In the Russian society of the authors' dreams, social mobility is not driven by education or intellectual skills: the only real talent is martial, and only warriors attain social advancement. Genghis Khan was, after all, illiterate, the project's authors argue. Finally, the Orthodox Church is another requisite for the recreation of the Russian Empire and the fulfillment of Russia's mission in the world.

Project Russia runs the gamut of Gothic metaphors in post-Soviet political thinking by offering a Gothic description of the future Russian society as a food chain and digestive system where "the people at the bottom" of the social hierarchy become a "source of energy" for – meaning "are consumed by" – the elite. In their turn, the "masses" "consume the energy products secreted by the elite" because this energy is "native, their own." The authors even spell out that this is how the organic society of ancient Rus developed and opine that it is

how post-Soviet Russia should also live. The only explanation for why Russia abandoned that idyllic existence was Peter the Great's sorcery: "Our Russia," they claim, "was bewitched." The vocabulary and thinking that divide the populace into predators and prey, so familiar to the writers of vampire-centered fiction and their fans, take the form here of a gore body, a society made up of those who "consume" and those who are "consumed."[142]

In 2005, yet another project was brought to the attention of the presidential administration. Mikhail Remizov, Director of the Institute of National Strategy and a member of the Russian Federation's Government Expert Council, authored a text titled *Project "State-Civilization."* [143] According to this project, Russia is not a European nation-state because this concept is incongruous with Russia's historical development. Russia does not belong to the Western civilization created by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment: it is, rather, a state-as-civilization in its own right. Russia developed as a union of various ethnicities around the "core" Russian nation, and only Russians can guarantee the stability of the post-Soviet space, which is intrinsic to their legitimate sphere of interests. The future political order should be "a people's monarchy" based on dictatorship and an authoritarian central power structure. The interests of this civilization should take absolute priority over the rights of its citizens.

Remizov's neomedieval social program bears remarkable similarities to *Project Russia*, Yuriev's *Fortress Russia*, and the neo-Eurasian doctrine. According to Galina Kozhevnikova, Remizov's *State-Civilization* reflected the mentality of the Institute of National Strategy and its Political News Agency (APN). Kozhevnikova explains that most of the APN staff tirelessly promotes Russian imperialism, including the reconstruction of the Soviet Empire within its pre-1991 borders. *State-Civilization* cross-references several other APN publications, especially those that discuss the applicability of fascist state practices to Russia. In those publications, Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany are considered not quite an exemplar of state-building but at least a reservoir of positive historical experience, some elements of which could be used to construct "Russia's state mechanism."[144]

Also in 2005, the Institute of Dynamic Conservatism (IDC), founded that year by economist Andrey Kobyakov, Orthodox writer Vitaly Averyanov, and journalist Maxim Kalashnikov (the pen name of right-wing political activist Vladimir Kucherenko),[145] came up with its own pamphlet, *The Russian Doctrine*, which describes "the image of a desirable Russia – Russia as it could and should be." Two years later, this very formula became the subtitle of Yuriev's utopian neomedieval novel *The Third Empire*.

The basics of *The Russian Doctrine*, "a program of conservative reformation,"[146] are as follows. Russia is, in Averyanov's words, a "militant civilization of justice and compassion," destined to gain a Eurasian empire.[147] Russian Orthodoxy is deemed the core of that "Russian civilization," which is to be based on the principles of "Russian supernationalism" that accords ethnic Russians special rights and privileges. The basic principles of Russia's social organization are aristocracy and autocracy. A new "authoritarian class," a new

"aristocracy," is to transform Russia into a society of estates and a dictatorship. An autocratic monarch is ideal, but a strong presidential rule or governorship with unlimited dictatorial power would be an acceptable compromise. The authors also endorse "the transition from a secular to a theocratic state," implying that in the course of this transition, confessions other than Russian Orthodoxy will disintegrate.

Although *The Russian Doctrine* pays much attention to the economic development and advanced technological modernization of Russia, its future citizens should focus on "self-restraint" rather than mere consumption. Anchoring their social project in their "understanding of the Russian mind," which forms "a mental triad" – the national, which is the most important and dominant; the tribal; and the individual – they assert that "democratic institutions such as the *Zemsky sobor*" (the medieval Russian representative institution that was summoned by the tsars sporadically during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) best express the will of people. People should be governed by a senate consisting of aristocrats with a lifetime membership. The senate will represent the three estates – the "military estate," the clergy (governed by the Russian Orthodox priests), and the common people. The head of state, ideally a monarch, appoints the third estate's representatives from "academia and the university corporation." Of course, this program cannot be accomplished without terror, although the authors recommend comparatively mild forms of it (which view has since evolved substantially, as I will discuss in Chapter 4):

> To postpone further the renewal of the administrative personnel means to endanger the existence of Russia as a sovereign state. A large-scale rotation of elites and large-scale repressions are needed. When we talk about repression, we mean less harsh measures than those used by Stalin or Ivan the Terrible. This time they should be more of an ideological and political nature and be limited to the deprivation of status and (in some cases) the confiscation of property. The recruitment of a new elite [...] should proceed less via elections from below than via a summons from above.[148]

The IDC enjoys considerable political and media attention. Averyanov was evidently gratified by the fact that Channel One Russia's *National Interests* invited him and his co-authors to present the *Doctrine* to Russian viewers on the very day of Putin's address to the Federal Assembly in 2006. Importantly, he also claimed that the reason for this invitation was that Putin's speech and their program "had a lot in common."[149]

Indeed, even if Putin's presidential address mentions none of the neomedieval changes delineated in the *Doctrine* and focuses instead on the external threats to Russia, the measures that he outlined were quite well attuned to the *Doctrine*'s emphasis on Russia as a "besieged fortress" and a "militant civilization":

> Overall, we see that conflict zones are expanding in the world and a special danger inheres in the fact that they are spreading into the area of our vital interests. […] Modern Russia needs an army that has every possibility to mount an adequate response to all the modern threats we face.[150]

The military needs and the reform of army funding announced in this speech are formulated as societal priorities. Even the demographic situation in the country and all social measures for the support of women, reproduction, and the family are looked upon exclusively through the prism of the need for recruits:

> And now for the most important matter. What is most important for our country? The Defense Ministry knows what is most important. Indeed, what I want to talk about is love, women, children. I want to talk about the family, about the most acute problem facing our country today – the demographic problem.[151]

The existence of the United States, hinted at in the guise of "a wolf," suffices to justify political measures to militarize the country.[152] Although Putin did not mention the IDC's *Doctrine*, he did quote Ivan Ilyin, "the well-known Russian thinker," in telling his listeners that the Russian state is built on its soldiers and that "the soldier 'represents the national unity of the people.'" Here, as in the *Doctrine*, the military estate is to play a crucial role in post-Soviet society.

Metropolitan Kirill, soon to be the patriarch of Russia, endorsed the *Doctrine* even more explicitly. He called it "an epochal event in the development of Russian thought," and said that it describes "Russia as it should and will be."[153] On August 20, 2007, he organized a presentation of the *Doctrine* in Moscow's Danilov Monastery, the headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Church. Speaking at that event, the co-authors of *The Russian Doctrine* proposed the "crossbreeding of Orthodoxy with nuclear weapons" and spelled out a principle of "Nuclear Orthodoxy,"[154] which combines Orthodoxy's intolerance and Russia's nuclear threat to the West. Egor Kholmogorov, an Izborsky Club "expert" associated with both the IDC and *The Russian Doctrine*, [155] referenced Putin's speech, and stated that Putin had "linked Russian Orthodoxy with the country's domestic social safety, and nuclear weapons with its international security." He called this "an eschatological strategy for Russia for all of history."[156] *The Russian Doctrine* was reprinted in 2007, 2008, and 2016.[157]

Izborsky Club activists often voice their admiration for the medieval social structure. Andrey Fursov, whom the IDC considers one of its leading historians, postulates that a society of estates led by the warrior estate is the best and the most time-tested form of social organization, because it was "typical for all Indo-European people."[158] Kholmogorov also chimed in, praising the boyars – Russia's medieval aristocracy whose "unity and authority" kept the country secure during the Time of Troubles – as its saviors in the past and the future alike, to be

further commended for having "supported the prestige of tsardom even at the cost of the honor that it valued so very highly."[159]

In 2006, Mikhail Remizov and Egor Kholmogorov jointly with several other figures – Stanislav Belkovsky, Roman Karev, Viktor Militarev, Alexey Pozin, and Yuri Solozobov – published a pamphlet titled *The Newest Middle Ages: Russia's Religious Policy in the Context of Global Transformation*.[160] Blaming the Enlightenment and "postmodern philosophy" for all the problems of contemporary society, the co-authors announce that the world is returning to the Newest Middle Ages, with its "dominance of religion in all spheres of life." Following Berdyaev, they claim that in the Middle Ages, corporations were united by religious faith, strongly implying that this social organization, governed by "Orthodox Ethics," should be brought back too. They advise the authorities to begin the process of "advancing medievalization," which includes the restoration of the medieval mentality and social conduct, the domination of the salvation of the soul over physical comfort, and a return to the "severe way of life" typical of the historical Middle Ages. The pamphlet appeals for Orthodox conversion "not only of individuals but of the whole national organism." I will discuss the eschatology presented by this pamphlet as the guiding principle of international relations in detail in the Conclusion.

Pamphlets developing neomedieval themes continued to surface in the following years. Nikita Mikhalkov's *Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism* (2010) established a continuity between Holy Rus and the Soviet Union, which he called "Great Russia without Holy Rus." The *Manifesto* laments the fall of the Romanov dynasty and highlights the place of monarchism in modern Russian conservatism. Like so many Izborsky Club members, Mikhalkov lauds the Empire, cites Berdyaev, and lists the key elements of "enlightened conservatism": "In its historical tradition, Russian conservatism has successively incorporated four components: the ecclesiastical, the monarchist, the Soviet, and the liberal."[161]

In 2009, Duma member Ilya Ponomarev, along with Mikhail Remizov and Roman Karev, prepared a report for the Institute of Modern Development titled *The Modernization of Russia as a Way to Construct a New State*. The report adopted Dmitry Medvedev's slogan of modernization in his article "Russia, Forward!"[162] and proposed an exceptional chain of hierarchical subordination, which granted the president extraordinary executive powers – a parallel vertical of power that Averyanov has interpreted approvingly as nothing less than a new Cheka.[163]

Ivan Okhlobystin, a popular actor and far-right activist who planned to run for the presidency in 2011, offered his electoral platform in the form of *The Doctrine 77*. Like other Izborsky Club members, Okhlobystin assumes that Russians are a messianic nation – "a katekhon nation" as he calls it – whose ultimate goal is to restore the Russian Empire and hold back the Antichrist. An empire led by a divinely anointed tsar, he writes, is the ideal future society and a condition necessary to Russians' individual happiness.[164] A tsarebozhnik,

Okhlobystin considers himself a pupil of Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga (Ivan Snychov) and proposes the re-establishment of "the sacred relations between the monarch and his people." In his doctrine, social changes take priority over any other transformations. Back then, in 2011, Okhlobystin had praised "the aristocracy's nonviolent influence on society." Eight years later he was speaking in favor of reviving the oprichnina.

With time, and especially after the formation of the Izborsky Club in 2012, the need to bombard the Kremlin with neomedieval pamphlets diminished. Neomedievalism has become part of Russia's memory politics, and the formerly marginal movements advocating for it are now part of the political mainstream. United Russia, the ruling party, has proclaimed "Russian conservatism" its official ideology, and in 2013, after the suppression of the 2012 protests, Putin selected "pragmatic conservatism" as his own doctrine.[165] The Izborsky Club may not be an official Kremlin think tank, but it is certainly a reservoir of, and conduit for, far-right thinking.[166] A hatred for democracy and a longing for empire are the common ground its members and the Kremlin share.

In March 2014, immediately after the annexation of Crimea, several ideas showcased in the programmatic pamphlets of the Russian far right explored in this chapter made their appearance in a draft of a governmental policy document titled *Foundations of a Cultural Policy*, [167] which bestows a special status on ethnic Russians, and proclaims them a "state-founding nation." It calls for "the preservation of the Russian national cultural and civilizational code," an expression dear to Alexander Prokhanov who fantasizes about the "magical codes" of Russian consciousness[168] and links these "codes" to the Russian messianic idea that was manifested in Russia's Middle Ages.[169] *Foundations* glorifies Russian history, claims Nikolai Danilevskii among its sources of inspiration, and affirms, presumably following Danilevskii, that "Russia is not Europe." Developed under the auspices of Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, this document referenced an anonymous "working group of experts," none of whom was mentioned by name. (Its authorship may have been left obscure because it included some very well-known far-right political figures.) This project caused a public outcry and was considerably modified before being issued in its final version in 2014.

The far-right pamphlets calling on Putin to turn time backward and re-establish the society of estates in post-Soviet Russia matches the Kremlin's and its proxies' neomedieval memory politics in stone, ink, and film. Taken all together, they demonstrate not only Russia's engagement with anti-democratic thinking but also the level of political influence wielded by the Russian far right on the Kremlin's politics, including its imperial ambitions.

Notes

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12 "U tsaria dolzhen byt' dvorets," *Radio Liberty*, February 19, 2021.
13 Nikita Mikhalkov, "Pochemu nam nuzhen tsar'?" *Diapazon*, November 29, 2011.
14 "Ideia strategicheskogo razvitiia Rossii: Russkaia mechta – 2050." *https://tsargrad.tv/shows/aleksandr-prohanov-chto-takoe-russkaja-mechta_218555*.
15 In recent years, the growing centrality of medieval themes in post-Soviet memory politics has started attracting scholarly attention and has produced some important research on Russian medievalism: Bradley A. Gorski, "The Battle for (Pre-)Modernity: Medieval Festivals in Contemporary Russia," *The Russian Review*, 2019, 78/4: 547–68; Sean Griffin, "Putin's Medieval Weapons in the War against Ukraine," *Studies in Medievalism*, XXIX, 2020: 13–20; *Medievalism in Finland and Russia: Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century Aspects*, ed. Reima Välimäki (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).
16 Anton Weiss-Wendt, "Secondhand History: Outsourcing Russia's Past to Kremlin Proxies," in *The Future of the Soviet Past: The Politics of History in Putin's Russia*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt and Nanci Adler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021), 48–70. See also Weiss-Wendt, *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History: Reasserting Control over the Past* (London, New York and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); and Tatiana Uskova, "'Ministerstvo pamiati': kak s pomoshch'iu 'obshchestvennoi' organizatsii Vladimir Medinskii zavladel proshlym," *MBK-news*, January 27, 2020.
17 The Russian Empire continues to exist in Dugin's imagination and is in his opinion a legitimate actor in global politics. Alexander Dugin, *Mezdunarodnye otnosheniia. Paradigmy, teorii, sotsiologiia* (Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt, 2014). While the neo-Eurasians accept the integration of other civilizations, Prokhanov, for example, favors the racial dominance of ethnic Russians.
18 Marlène Laruelle presents the Izborsky Club as a parallel to the conservative think tanks in liberal democracies but accepts here that the Club has the additional objective of influencing the authorities. Laruelle, "The Izborsky Club, or

the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia," *The Russian Review*, 2016, 75/4: 626–44.

19 On "Russia as a supreme civilization," see Alexander Panarin, *Filosofiia politiki* (Moscow: Novaia shkola, 1996).

20 Alexander Dugin, "Vremia vozvrazhat' nashi sviatyni: printsipy i strategiia griadushei voiny," *Evraziia*, December 15, 2015.

21 An issue of the Izborsky Club's *Russian Strategies* journal titled "The Creed of the Russian Dream" and published in 2019 brought all these ideas together in one volume, *Izborskii klub: Russkie strategii*. https://izborsk-club.ru/magazine_files/2019_09.pdf.

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30 Ekaterina Shevtsova, "Vladimir Zhirinovsky prochel stikh pro shosse Ivana Groznogo," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, November 2, 2016; A. Savin, "'Zhirinovsky predlozhil pereimenovat' Leninskii prospekt v shosse Ivana Groznogo," *Argumenty i fakty*, November 2, 2016.

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3

POST-SOVIET HISTORIANS AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVISTS ON THE MEDIEVAL OPRICHNINA

The far-right consensus on the neomedieval social agenda translates into a unanimous view on how to attain the Brave New Middle Ages: through terror. The history and memory of the *oprichnina* and Stalinism supply the key models for Russian far-right thinking on the implementation of the terror that they call the *new oprichnina* (or *neo-oprichnina, neooprichnina* [novaya oprichnina, neo-oprichnina, neooprichnina]). The admirers of neomedievalism fancy that the new oprichnina will pave the way to empire. Like the doctrine of tsarebozhie, the beliefs of neo-oprichnina communities center around the re-institution of the oprichnina in Russia.

Contrary to those observers and scholars who hold that the new oprichnina has only minimally penetrated the Russian consciousness and especially that of its political elite, the following three chapters will demonstrate that the new oprichnina performs a major role in the post-Soviet historical memory, politics, and cultural debates.[1] I argue that over the past two decades, the new oprichnina has expanded into a mobilizing force behind Russian neomedieval memory politics and has inflamed the mobmemory of terror. The Kremlin's memory politics has succeeded in bringing back hatred as a prime component of the post-Soviet identity. Reminiscent of Stalinism, the mobmemory of terror has regenerated "the civic duty to hate," as Serhy Yekelchyk has aptly called it.[2] And the construction of mobmemory itself has been profoundly impacted by the mutual influences between the doctrine of *tsarebozhie* and the recent historiography of the oprichnina.

Believing in the Oprichnina

Tsarebozhie cuts a wide swath within what is sometimes called "political Orthodoxy," in its emphasis on the fundamentalist aspect of the radical Orthodox sects.[3] The origins of tsarebozhie dogmas can be traced back to the cult of Nicholas II that emerged in Orthodox circles after his murder by the

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Bolsheviks in 1918. In its present form, however, tsarebozhie took shape in the 1990s, gaining considerable influence by the end of the Yeltsin presidency, and now commands an ardent following among members of the Izborsky Club, the Orthodox clergy, and Russian politicians. Tsarebozhie holds that Nicholas II was sacrificed for the entire Russian nation, as Christ was for all humanity. His death for his people was the redemption of Holy Russia. The idea that the Russians should repent their collective sin of regicide is crucial to this creed.[4]

Nicholas II's canonization in 2000 as a *strastoterpets* (Passion-Bearer) contributed to the spread of tsarebozhie, because it re-established the medieval tradition of canonizing Russian princes who were murdered before they could lay claim to the throne. It also energized the cult of Ivan the Terrible, imparting to it the momentum it had displayed in the 2000s.[5] Boris Knorre argues that Nicholas II's canonization helped position Ivan the Terrible in the role of a strong and mighty tsar, a masculine and heroic figure – in contrast to Nicholas II, who was viewed as an unresisting martyr who met his death together with his entire family.[6]

The oprichnina and Ivan the Terrible are among tsarebozhie's central symbols, and its followers vociferously demand his canonization. Tsarebozhie declares that in the end times, Ivan the Terrible, the "Tsar-Victor," will rise, like Christ, to cleanse the Russian land from its enemies, and first and foremost from the Jews. This belief in Ivan's resurrection, which underlies the push for his canonization, exposes its supporters' endorsement of a reversion to wholesale political terror.[7] In fact, this "terrible sacrality" (*groznaia sakral'nost'*) – the neo-Eurasians' occasional term for the new oprichnina – is advanced as an argument for the normalization of terror as a foundation of Russian society.[8]

Much like tsarebozhie, the far from marginal neo-oprichnina has a wide reach, as a religious creed and a grassroots movement. Alexander Dvorkin, who studied the movement, calls it "a totalitarian sect."[9] In 2007, *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the Russian government's official newspaper, estimated that those sects had a million followers,[10] and their numbers have grown substantially since then. Alexander Shmelev maintains that the concept developed by the Russian Orthodox Church and adopted in 2000 was dead on arrival and has attracted few new supporters, while tsarebozhie has many active adherents and its influence is growing.[11] Neo-oprichnina brotherhoods,[12] which imitate the oprichnina in their everyday life, exist today in several Russian regions.

The Russian Orthodox Church does not officially support tsarebozhie, categorizing it as a deviation from the true faith. But, while Patriarch Alexy opposed Ivan the Terrible's canonization by reason of his crimes, Patriarch Kirill has, as we saw earlier, endorsed the erection of monuments to the terrible tsar.[13]

Ivan Snychov's Rebranding of Ivan the Terrible and the Oprichnina

Ivan Snychov, Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga from 1990 to 1995, articulated the doctrine of tsarebozhie in his book *Autocracy of the Spirit* (1994).[14] Probably co-written with (or even entirely written by) Konstantin

Dushenov,[15] *Autocracy* was arguably among the first post-Soviet Orthodox pamphlets to revive the idea of *katekhon*. [16] Katekhon, embodied in Russia's anointed tsar – the Christ-like figure who is sent to protect Orthodox Christianity and to inspire the Russians, the chosen people, to fulfill their mission of shielding the world from the Antichrist – plays an important part in the post-Soviet neomedieval revival.[17]

Snychov declares that Russians are "the imperial nation" (*derzhavnyi narod*) that is preventing Satan from dominating the world,[18] and that the Orthodox tsar is "the incarnation of the entire God-chosen and theophoric [God-bearing] people, its prayerful spokesman and guardian angel."[19]

Snychov traces the equivalence between monarch and God back to the Byzantine tradition, particularly to Deacon Agapetus' sixth-century *Advice to the Emperor* and to Russia's twelfth-century chronicles and the writings of Iosif Volotsky (1439–1515), a theologist and a proponent of unlimited autocracy. But as scholars Boris Uspensky and Viktor Zhivov have convincingly demonstrated, there was no equivalence between tsar and God in the Russian tradition of this early period. On the contrary, any comparison between God and tsar pointed to the unbridgeable gap between the two. Uspensky and Zhivov show that the tradition of calling the tsar "Christ" to which Snychov refers did not emerge until the eighteenth century.[20]

Snychov also revived the antisemitic claim that the medieval heresy of the Judaizers "destroyed Byzantium" and threatened Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian state in the time of Ivan IV. That sixteenth-century Orthodox heresy, which included some elements of Judaism and counted among its followers the predominantly ethnically Russian population of Moscow and Novgorod, had been dubbed "a Jewish conspiracy" by Russian nationalists in the late 1960s, an imputation that was embraced by post-Soviet nationalists in the 1990s.[21] According to Snychov, "the deicidic Jews" had come to Holy Rus specifically to combat the Russians, the theophoric nation whose "purpose in life is to carry on the true faith."[22]

The rehabilitation and sacralization of Ivan the Terrible, which goes hand in hand with the rehabilitation and sacralization of the oprichnina, constitute the core of Snychov's writings. Indeed, Ivan the Terrible is crucial to his revamping of Russian history, symbolizing to him the unity of the Russian people and the Orthodox Church under the "holy" tsar who stands above them both.[23] Wielding speculations ungrounded in any historical evidence and altering the history of Ivan the Terrible's rule as he sees fit, Snychov promotes the Stalinist fabrication that Ivan was defamed by Westerners and other enemies of Russia, an opinion that was later taken up by Medinsky.

The whitewashing of Ivan the Terrible's personality weighs heavily in the advocacy for his canonization. From the official Orthodox hierarchy's viewpoint, however, two deadly sins – Ivan's murder of his eldest son, Ivan, and the killing on his orders of Filipp (Kolychev), metropolitan of Moscow, who was canonized as a martyr in 1652 – stand in the way of that canonization. To

counter the charge of filicide, Snychov produces the falsification that Antonio Possevino (1533–1611), a papal diplomat at Ivan the Terrible's court, invented this "Russophobe legend" about Ivan, whom he hated, purely to discredit the Russian tsar.[24] As we will see, that counterfactual conspiracy theory bore fruit in the 2000s, when it became a commonplace in post-Soviet historiography. In 2013, it also prompted historian Igor Froyanov and Vasily Boiko-Veliky, a leader of the Holy Russia neo-oprichnina movement, to request, in an open letter to Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, the removal of Ilya Repin's painting "Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan" from Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery.[25]

In 2017, during the controversy surrounding the erection of the monument to Ivan in Alexandrovo, Putin gave voice to this revisionist story and articulated the argument that criticizing Ivan is "a means for battling our country":

> Take, for example, the famous legend that Ivan the Terrible killed his son. It is still not known whether he really killed his son or not. Many researchers believe that he did not kill anyone at all and that the Pope's nuncio made it up when he came to him for talks and tried to turn Orthodox Rus into a Catholic Rus. And when Ivan IV turned him [Possevino – D.Kh.] down, all kinds of legends emerged […]. He was made into Ivan the Terrible, a super-violent person. Although, if one looks at other countries in that period of time, the same thing was happening everywhere. It was quite a violent time. I do not want to say that Ivan the Terrible was all that white and fluffy; he was probably a very tough individual.[26]

In March 2021, "experts" from the Russian Society of Military History, which had been established by Putin's decree in 2012 and was chaired by Medinsky, "condemned the idea that Ivan the Terrible was implicated into the murder of his son" in a high-profile conference "Ivan the Terrible: Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow."[27]

Snychov also challenges the murder of Metropolitan Filipp. According to the historical sources, Filipp denounced Ivan's oprichnina and its massacres, and publicly refused to bless him in 1568, after which the metropolitan was humiliated, imprisoned, and murdered on Ivan's orders by the tsar's perpetrator-in-chief, Malyuta Skuratov. Snychov insists that Ivan the Terrible did not kill Filipp, nor did he order a massacre in Novgorod by his oprichniks that resulted in the slaying of possibly upward of 2,000 innocents under the false charge of plotting against the tsar. According to Snychov, Ivan even traveled to Tver to investigate the accusations against Filipp, whom Ivan loved and "had always protected against his enemies."

Snychov concocts an account of the murder that also, by implication, exonerates Ivan from the Novgorod massacre:

> [Ivan IV] sent his trusted oprichnik Malyuta Skuratov to Filipp for his blessing on the campaign and, presumably, for explanations that could shed light on "the Novgorod affair." But Malyuta found the saint no longer

> alive. He could only pay him his last respects by being present at the burial and immediately left with a report to the tsar.[28]

On August 30, 2021, Putin alluded to Snychov's version of Filipp's murder. While taking Putin on a guided tour of the Otroch Monastery, Igor Rudenya, governor of Tver, mentioned that Malyuta Skuratov had strangled Metropolitan Filipp in that church. Putin reacted dismissively to this historical fact, saying, "That is just one version of the events."[29] When reported by TASS, this brief exchange attracted a great deal of attention in the Russian media.

In his book, Snychov declares that Ivan knew he was God's servant, charged with the sacred mission of protecting the Orthodox religion and the Russian state. The "holy" tsar came to this realization through the mystery of "the divine anointment to the tsardom":

> The church ritual of anointing revealed to the young monarch the depth of the tsar's mystical connection with the people and the associated magnitude of his religious responsibility. Ioann saw himself as "the hegumen of all Russia." And from that moment on, this awareness guided all his personal actions and official endeavors until his death.[30]

The false claim that Ivan was "the Lord's first anointed Russian tsar," having undergone a rite that established a "mystical connection" between the tsar and the messianic Russian people, is crucial to the rest of Snychov's apologia of the despot, helping him to legitimize all the tsar's deeds as God-inspired.[31] However, this claim is, once again, not supported by the historical sources. The entire procedure of the Orthodox tsar's anointing was not part of Ivan's coronation, since it was not performed for the first time until 1584, after Ivan's death. This question has been thoroughly researched by Uspensky and other historians, who have proven that the first anointed tsar was actually Ivan's son, Feodor Ioannovich.[32]

Snychov also reinvents the tyrant's character, depicting him as a mild-mannered man of conscience who hated to punish but felt obliged to do so in fulfillment of his religious duty. Snychov summarily dismisses the historiographical tradition and historical sources, judging them incapable of penetrating the mentality of Ivan, "a true Orthodox believer": "Gentle and kind by nature, the tsar suffered and agonized when forced to apply harsh measures."[33]

The Oprichnina Monastery: "The Key to a Harmonious Society"

Having glorified Ivan the Terrible, Snychov's book goes on to extol his oprichnina, "an instrument in Ivan's hands" and "a regiment of the tsar's supporters" that helped him purify Russia's life and protect "Russian Orthodox *sobornost'* against heresies."[34] From the fact that Alexandrovo sloboda, the center of the oprichnina, imitated some aspects of monastic life, Snychov infers that the tsar

and the oprichniks lived a pious life. Like monks, the oprichniks pursued only one goal: to serve God, which for them meant to reform all aspects of Russian life following Orthodox dogmas. The sloboda was, in short, "a monastery."[35] For Snychov, as for the Russian far right that walked in his footsteps, the oprichnina was Ivan's "most Christian" solution for the task before him and the principal force that enabled him to restructure Russian society according to the dictates of Orthodox piety:[36] "Having taken upon himself this most ungratifying job, the tsar, like a surgeon, had to excise the rotten and useless members of the Russian body."[37]

In Snychov's words, the oprichnina helped Ivan "attune" the society of orders to the Orthodox religion. Ivan, the "anointed tsar," created it to preserve "the harmony of people's life" based on co-operation between the estates in their service to the tsar and to God:[38]

> Each estate has its purpose of service, while each estate is also a religious community united in the common Christian mission, that being the salvation of the soul.[39]

The oprichnina, Snychov opines, offers a model of unity for all Russians. He also reiterates these ideas in other writings – for example, in *Be Russian!* where he states that the society of estates is the only godly Orthodox social organization. For him, the society of estates reflects the organic harmony and intrinsicality of Russian society compared to the power-based divisions and social contradictions of the Western world.[40] The Izborsky Club members, as we have seen, also cherish the idea that "the division of labor" between estates in their service to God and to the Russian monarchy differs from the Western "hierarchy of rights." Hence, claims regarding "the sacred reunion of the tsar and the Russian people" should not mislead one into thinking that the totalitarian creed of tsarebozhie is a crusade for equality and an egalitarian society, as is sometimes believed.[41]

Snychov exhumes the Uvarov triad (Sergei Uvarov [1786–1855] was Nicholas I's minister of education) of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationhood," declaring autocracy to be the only authentic Russian principle of social organization, because it dispenses with any opposition between the tsar and his people. Snychov goes on to claim that Alexey Adashev, *voevod* (military governor) of Lithonia and Ivan's confidant, and Silvestr, an Orthodox archpriest, both members of the *Izbrannaya rada*, the relatively pacific government of Ivan's youth, tried to limit Ivan's power by attempting to foist on him the idea that the tsar's role was to balance various interest groups as the Western monarchs did. Ivan resisted their efforts and instead introduced the oprichnina to preserve the authentic Russian system, which it did by securing the tsar's unique role as "God's anointed," standing above all social groups, including the aristocracy, the common people, and the clergy.[42] Later historians, such as Igor Froyanov, have reiterated this claim.

From Snychov's point of view, the ideal social organization is described in the *Domostroy*, Russia's anonymous sixteenth-century lesson on good domestic order, which may have been written by Silvestr.[43] This tract prescribes how a family should be ruled and organized, and by "family," it also means house servants and slaves (kholops). In this patriarchal universe, the "father of the family" has the absolute right to punish and reward; all other family members are his mentally and socially deficient "children." Serfdom is foundational to the functioning of this family, and its kholops and other serfs are to work for their master in perpetuity, having no right to leave. They are dependent on his "goodwill" for everything, including their food and clothing. The *Domostroy* provides detailed prescriptions for social conduct, including the Orthodox rites and rituals that were deemed an integral part of good domestic organization.[44] While in modern Russian parlance "*domostroy*" is used metaphorically to describe extreme patriarchy and the most oppressive forms of domestic discipline, Snychov calls it "the best reflection of the bounty of Russian social life."

In Snychov's creed, Russian society is also a "family," and for the tsar's officials, the implementation of the functions of state is as sacred as a monk's religious service. In Snychov's other writings, he proposes an entire agenda for the return to this "Holy Russia," involving an accord ensured by the elimination of the division of powers, especially in Russia's federal structure, which in his view threatens Russian territorial unity.

The final element of Snychov's social project is *sobornost'*, an old Slavophile notion that is here coupled with a hierarchy of professional estates, including teachers, doctors, peasants, and the military. A total rejection of the secular state and "the restoration of the Russian state in its natural borders, including Belorussia and Ukraine," are other, equally important elements in his doctrine.[45]

Snychov's distortion of Russian medieval history needs to be contextualized against other historical hoaxes of the 1990s. Conveying the prevailing skepticism about the Soviet version of Russian history, those hoaxes and conspiracy theories communicated the shock experienced by the entire system of historical references in the last years of the Soviet regime and after its collapse.[46]

The New Chronology, Anatoly Fomenko's pseudo-history, offers a secular parallel to Snychov's fraud. Starting with the assumption that the duration of human history has been exaggerated, Fomenko, a prominent mathematician, applied what he claimed to be methods of mathematical analysis to ancient and medieval history. Judging the magnitude of decline from Antiquity to the Middle Ages impossible, he concluded that the history of the ancient world is a myth, a deception perpetrated by Renaissance intellectuals. Therefore, written human history begins no earlier than 800 to 1000 CE. Fomenko also opined that Tsar Ivan IV did not exist in reality: the image of him transmitted by historical sources is an amalgam of four successive rulers of a non-existent Rus. According to him, "the Romanov Judaizers" made up "the Mongol Horde" out of thin air and blamed an imaginary Ivan for the terror they in fact inflicted. Reinforcing his "mathematical" models with erroneous etymologies and flawed

linguistic analysis, Fomenko further claimed, in *The Empire* (1996), that the multinational Russian-Tartar state had almost completely controlled the Eurasian continent.[47] And by the 2000s, his purported "Russko-Ordynsky state" had grown exponentially in his imagination, into a Russo-Tartar empire that ruled Siberia and North America in the eighteenth century.[48]

The astonishing success of *The New Chronology* in the mid-1980s may have encouraged Snychov, in a twisted version of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," to pursue his own falsifications. Snychov's followers envied *The New Chronology*'s popularity, perceiving it as their competitor in historical revisionism. For example, Dmitry Volodikhin, Professor of History at Moscow State University whose books about Ivan will be examined below, took up arms against *The New Chronology* in his dissemination of the tsarebozhie version of Russian history.[49]

In 1995, after Snychov's death, the Institute of Russian Civilization was founded in Moscow under the directorship of Oleg Platonov, a writer and notorious Holocaust denier, to spread Snychov's dogmas.[50] Platonov made public statements about Ivan the Terrible, claiming that the oprichnina had stood in the way of Catholicism's penetration into Russia: "By instituting the oprichnina, Ivan the Terrible beheaded this hydra, preventing Russia from becoming like Poland."[51]

Tsarebozhie and the neo-oprichnina movement have successfully created a new context for post-Soviet politics, bolstering neomedieval thinking among both Orthodox leaders and Russia's political class – not least because, as Mikhail Suslov has shown, Snychov's thought has been influenced by Putin's "favorite philosopher," Ilya Ilyin.[52] Natalya Poklonskaya, who has held the positions of Prosecutor General of Crimea after the annexation and Deputy Chair of the State Duma Committee for International Affairs, is a known devotee of the cult of Nicholas II.[53] Another Duma member known for his ties to tsarebozhie is Sergey Aksyonov, until 2014 leader of Russian Unity, Crimea's pro-Russia party, and head of Crimea after its occupation by Russia.[54] Is it a coincidence that these key figures in the occupation of Crimea are associated with that sect?

The Oprichnina's Challenge to Historiography

Ivan's oprichnina has been the subject of intense research, and it is not my goal to discuss that in any detail here. Instead, I will briefly review the uses of this historiography in post-Soviet memory politics and explore those historiographical concepts as they resonate in the public discourse and popular culture. This analysis will highlight the interconnections between the historical writings and the religious movements that have been crucial to the creation of the post-Soviet mobmemory. It will also address the part played by post-Soviet historiography in the normalization of terror and will demonstrate how religious beliefs have influenced its development.

The nineteenth-century historiographical tradition, which includes Nikolay Karamzin (1776–1826), Nikolay Kostomarov (1817–1885), Sergey Solovyov (1820–1879), and Vasily Klyuchevsky (1841–1911), may offer differing explanations of the origins of the oprichnina, but it does agree that it was a regime of ruthless state terror. Karamzin considered terror a result of Ivan's warped personality, and emphasized his immorality and the fact that the oprichniks were hated by the entire nation.[55] Kostomarov traced the roots and the particularities of the Russian absolute monarchy to the brutalities of the Tartar yoke, and stressed Ivan's sadistic participation in torture and executions.[56] Klyuchevsky denounced the oprichnina as a regime of senseless cruelty that had no clear political goals. Contesting the view that Ivan's crimes were a manifestation of his paranoia and the oprichnina a consequence of that disorder,[57] Klyuchevsky refused to make mental illness the excuse that would spare Ivan IV the historical responsibility for his deeds.

Even Sergey Solovyov, who deemed Ivan an innovative statesman and explained the terror as a struggle of the tsar and his new estate of oprichniks against the boyars, concluded that the oprichnina intensified political animosity in Russian society and put Russia in the way of awful times to come. Solovyov also pointed to Ivan's moral corruption and believed that the oprichnina persisted throughout Ivan's reign, albeit under a different name.

In the early years of the Bolshevik regime, historian Robert Vipper opposed that tradition, declaring Ivan the Terrible a genius and a predecessor of Peter the Great.[58] Vipper explained Ivan's policies, including the oprichnina, by his strategic drive to the Baltic, a goal that would actually be attained by Peter I. Hence, the establishment of the oprichnina was necessary for the centralization of the state during Ivan's "endless war" against the Tatars in the south and the Baltic state of Livonia in the west. In particular, Vipper claimed that Filipp was murdered because he tried to rescue boyars found guilty of treason. Although disregarded by Russian historians in the 1920s, Vipper's concept found support under Stalin. Kevin M.F. Platt, in his ground-breaking study of Stalin's appropriation of Ivan the Terrible, shows that Vipper's views were made a cornerstone of the Stalin-era rehabilitation of Ivan.[59]

Stalin praised Ivan, his oprichnina, and Malyuta Skuratov, the tsar's right-hand man, for suppressing "the treason of the reactionary boyars," thus purportedly ending the feudal fragmentation of power and fostering the creation of a strong Russian state. Stalin enjoyed being compared with Ivan the Terrible, the originator of state terror based on a unity between the leader and his people "against corrupt elites, and the rich."[60] The notorious Soviet writer Alexey Tolstoy (1883–1945), a fervent Stalinist ideologue, also promoted this interpretation in his prose.[61] Stalin's rehabilitation of Ivan was best reflected in his criticism of Sergey Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* (1944–1945). He objected that it represented the oprichniks in an unfair and denigrating way, "like the Ku Klux Klan," and alleged during a meeting with the director that the oprichniks were "a royal guard" and "a progressive army." At the same meeting, Stalin disparaged the representation of Ivan IV as

indecisive and hesitant to pursue terror in full force, and praised him for "protecting the country from foreign influence." Stalin's only criticism of Ivan IV, in fact, was that he was not cruel enough.[62] As we will see below, this remark was later positively quoted by Igor Froyanov. No disapproval or mockery of Ivan IV was allowed under Stalin: *Ivan Vasilievich* (1934–1936), Mikhail Bulgakov's comic play that imagines the tsar traveling in time to Soviet Russia, languished in obscurity until Leonid Gaidai adapted it for the screen in the late Soviet period.

Solovyov's arguments were revived by historian Sergei Platonov (1860–1933), a victim of the Academic Trial (1929–1931, an NKVD fabrication). Although Platonov believed that Ivan was an exceptional statesman of his time, and argued that the repressions had a positive effect because they were anti-boyar, he nonetheless considered Ivan a vile person who, among other crimes in his youth, looted the cathedral of St. Sophia in Novgorod.[63] Platonov coined the idea that Ivan's "reforms" represented the state colonization of free population who lived in the so-called "field" [*pole*] and that the oprichnina was designed as a land reform to destroy the landed property of Russian aristocracy. He documented the horrors of the oprichnina and argued that the oprichnina was destructive to Ivan's government, predetermined his foreign policy failures, and had led Russia into a profound crisis by the end of his reign.

Historian Stepan Veselovsky (1876–1952) did not embrace the Stalinist rehabilitation of Ivan. In an article published in 1946 and a 1963 study titled *Investigations in the History of the Oprichnina*, Veselovsky maintained that the oprichnina had no social aims and achieved no political goals, and cannot therefore be interpreted as the struggle of a new nobility supporting the tsar against the boyars. It resulted not in changes to the political order but only in the annihilation of people, making Ivan's reign among the most catastrophic periods in Russia's history.[64]

Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign put a temporary end to the Stalinist praise of Ivan the Terrible. However, the Marxist view that the oprichnina was a tool of class struggle and that the reactionary boyars opposed the national interests of the Russian state persisted in the Soviet historiography of the 1960s. Alexander Zimin shared this interpretation of the oprichnina while still stressing Ivan's sadistic cruelty.[65]

In the Brezhnev period, when Ivan the Terrible became a vehicle for Aesopian critiques of Stalinism, late Soviet historiography further developed the understanding of his reign as one of the most devastating events in Russia's troubled history. Studying the *synodiki* (the commemorative lists of Ivan's victims), Ruslan Skrynnikov (1931–2009), an internationally renowned scholar of Ivan's rule, convincingly demonstrated that the oprichnina inflicted a devastating, pointless terror, and ushered in a period of lawlessness in the country that impaired the Russian state overall and perverted its political culture:

> Coercion became an inalienable trait of Russia's incipient autocratic structure. Under the Terrible, that feature of the political order manifested more acutely than ever before.[66]

Indeed, the intractable terror machine ended by corrupting the entire structure of state:

> In an atmosphere of mass persecutions, universal fear, and denunciations, the machinery of violence created in the oprichnina acquired a disproportionate influence on the political structure of leadership.[67]

Skrynnikov shows that state violence in Russia stood in stark contrast to the more liberal parliamentary rule of its East European neighbor, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the monarch was elected by the *Sejm*, a representative institution. Skrynnikov's research confirms that the only goal of Ivan's politics was to foster a regime of unlimited power over his subjects, whom he set against each other, establishing violence as the sole engine of his rule. The disastrous consequences of this regime profoundly marked the nature of the Russian monarchy and set back the country's intellectual development:

> The fact that the autocracy was born in an atmosphere of terror long defined the characteristic features of the emerging political system. [...] Terror was not limited to the physical extermination of people. The oprichnina perpetrated a genuine catastrophe in the sphere of ideas and the ideological life of Russian society.[68]

According to Skrynnikov, Ivan's terror ruined the Russian state's empire-building efforts and laid the groundwork for the Time of Troubles.[69]

With few exceptions (to which we will return), this liberal tradition in the interpretation of the oprichnina came to dominate late Soviet historiography and continued into the post-Soviet period. Boris Florya in particular has endorsed this understanding of the results of Ivan the Terrible's reign. In a study published in 1999, Florya concludes that Ivan's rule "destroyed and bankrupted the entire country and weakened its defenses, rendering Russia incapable of repelling the attacks of its enemies."[70] Against the widespread view of Russian society's silence in response to Ivan's tyranny, Andrey Bulychev has examined liturgies for the victims of Ivan's terror and concluded that "not just a few morally sound persons but also entire communities morally resented the oprichnina's terror."[71]

Mikhail Krom's research continues this liberal historiographical trend.[72] Krom's central thesis is that under Ivan IV, Russia was building an early-modern state of a European type. The *Zemsky sobor*, an "emerging democratic institution," bore a family resemblance to European parliaments. The idea of a commonwealth (*delo gosudarevo i zemskoe*) that had surfaced in Russia in the

sixteenth century was also typical of the early-modern state, making Ivan's tyranny largely "an anomaly" in Russian history. Krom stresses that the elected monarchy – a political arrangement that Ivan IV despised – re-emerged *de facto* after his reign.[73] Krom's construction carries the clear political message that Russia was a normal European country in the past and can become so again, a concept that runs counter to historian Alexander Yanov's vision of the oprichnina as "an autocratic revolution" that prevented the Russian state from following the European path. Yanov saw a continuity between the oprichnina and the Bolsheviks, holding that they and Stalin pursued this same long-standing tradition of terror in implementing their anti-Western authoritarian politics.[74]

The Mystical Turn in Oprichnina Historiography

In the late 1990s to early 2000s, the liberal historiographical tradition was challenged by a new trend that I term *the mystical turn*. [75] In the interpretation of the oprichnina, the mystical turn emphasizes the religious motives that guided Ivan in establishing the oprichnina and the role that the Orthodox faith of the historical actors of that time played in this process. Krom adduces an increased scholarly interest in the medieval religious consciousness in explaining the origins of this trend.[76] In contrast, Kevin Platt links it to "a religious revival that called for the canonization of Ivan the Terrible as an Orthodox saint" and considers it a result of Russia's new-found freedom from censorship.[77]

The fall of communism did indeed lift the Soviet taboo on everything religious and helped bring about what was hastily dubbed an Orthodox Renaissance that has made Russian Orthodoxy a fashionable part of post-Soviet life. Most Russians were massively, albeit superficially, converted to Orthodoxy after the fall of the Soviet regime. However, as several studies have shown, declaring oneself an Orthodox believer is essentially a way of affirming one's Russian identity and does not necessarily entail an understanding of even basic Christian dogmas and traditions.[78] The Orthodox Church's attempts to fill the ideological void left by the collapse of communism created a broader context for the mystical turn in post-Soviet historical studies, which evinced a profound disenchantment with the pro-Western ideology.

Already in the late Soviet period, the interest in the history of ancient Rus and Byzantium shared by some Russian historians and clergy had created many channels of communication among those milieus. The post-Soviet Orthodox Renaissance and the fact that several historians of ancient Rus happen to be Orthodox believers further strengthened those ties. Meanwhile, the increasing prominence of the oprichnina in the political discourse and public debates was laying a firm groundwork for a neomedieval memory politics.

While the mystical turn is not the only driving force that has transformed the oprichnina into a pivotal feature of the post-Soviet mobmemory, its contribution has been significant. The covert influence of tsarebozhie must also be considered in explaining the radical change in the interpretation of the oprichnina

that occurred in the late 1990s to early 2000s. At the same time, the mystical turn produced arguments and ideas that were used to reinforce several dogmas of tsarebozhie, sometimes despite its participants' intentions, and rapidly spilled over into the nascent neomedieval memory politics.

The mystical turn has both Russian and international precedents that are heavily influenced by the Stalinist view of the terrible tsar.[79] Michael Cherniavsky (1922–1973), a Russian émigré and American historian, stated that Ivan's soubriquet identified him as not "terrible" but "awe-inspiring." Breaking away from the tradition of viewing Ivan as a psychologically unstable or even pathological individual,[80] Cherniavsky presents him as a new type of personality that emerged in the sixteenth century in both Russia and Europe, an interpretation that followed the Stalinist discourse on Ivan. "Autonomous of old standards," "above human law and independent of divine law," Ivan lived in a world where any means of achieving immortality was fair game. Supporting his ideas by the results of the exhumation of Ivan's corpse in 1963 by Soviet anthropologist Mikhail Gerasimov, Cherniavsky argued that Ivan suffered from an intensely painful condition involving osteophytes, "which virtually fused his spine." The sick man "lived in an age of the 'terrible' rulers – Richard III and Henry VIII in England, Louis XI in France, Philip II in Spain, Sigismondo Malatesta and Cesare Borgia and his father Pope Alexander VI, and Christian II in Denmark. All of them were monstrous and *terribile*, and all of them, virtually at the same time, seem too much of a coincidence."[81] A victim of his time, Ivan nevertheless ensured, "through cruel terror[,] justice and order."[82] The notion that this "awe-inspiring" tsar learned from his Western peers to rule by terror carries considerable weight in the post-Soviet right-wing nationalists' neomedieval discourse.

Edward Keenan, another American historian, later used linguistic analysis to argue that Ivan became "terrible" long after his death, entirely due to a unique political confluence:

> Ivan Vasil'ievich of Moscow (1530–84) was not known as "the Terrible" […] until nearly two centuries after his death, when three elements merged in the still-embryonic Russian historiography: the native anti-Romanov prejudice of the seventeenth-century "old boyar aristocracy"; an anti-Ivan (and for the most part anti-Muscovite) Western literary tradition based on the pamphlet literature of the sixteenth century; and the early modern European practice of assigning bynames to dynasts.
>
> All of which, I repeat, is not to say that Ivan wasn't nasty; that is a different question.[83]

In Russia, the mystical turn was foreshadowed by the works of two historians whose ideas about Ivan and his oprichnina were generally disregarded by their contemporaries in the profession – Daniil Al'shits and Vladimir Sharov. Al'shits (1919–2012) viewed the oprichnina as a pivotal event in Russian history. Best

remembered for his popularization of Russian history, including in several stage plays, he claimed that the oprichnina configured the Russian autocratic system and was envisioned by Ivan the Terrible as such. This was not terror for terror's sake but the construction of a new system of power; not an anomalous event in Russian history but the meaningful result of its prior history with important formative consequences for the state. Its goal was the centralization of power, which Ivan elevated to a new level by ending feudal fragmentation. Hence, the oprichnina had never gone away under Ivan, only changing its name from the oprichnina to the *dvor* (court).[84] Al'shits views, largely ignored by the profession in his time, received a great deal of attention from post-Soviet oprichnina enthusiasts. Al'shits books about Ivan's reign were reprinted in 2020.

Vladimir Sharov (1952–2018), a novelist who began his career as a historian, later claimed to be the wellspring of the new and more positive interpretations of the oprichnina: "I am proud of my concept of the oprichnina, a military monastic order based on Biblical principles."[85] His dissertation on the oprichnina was defended at Voronezh State University in 1986 and attracted no attention at that time.[86] But since the turn of the 1990s, his concept of the oprichnina has been publicized in several lectures and published at least in two versions, in 1991 and 2003.[87]

According to Sharov, Ivan the Terrible, indoctrinated in the Old Testament conception of God as intimidating and vindictive in his wrath, wanted Moscow to become not the Third Rome but a Second Jerusalem. Sharov holds that Ivan sincerely believed himself to be a truly anointed tsar, a God-like figure who could and should punish his subjects, not least because he had been educated from his early childhood in that image of his power.[88] To enact his Last Judgement, the tsar organized his faithful followers, the oprichniks, into a militant monastic order. Sharov's hypothesis follows Vasily Klyuchevsky's insight that Ivan, in his obsession with self and with power, appropriated the images of the Biblical kings.[89] But Sharov insists that Ivan's understanding of his power as God-given was sincere and spiritual, motivated by religious piety and not, as Klyuchevsky had indicated, by a thirst for unlimited power, cynicism, and sadistic impulses.[90] Studying Ivan's correspondence with Kurbsky, Klyuchevsky notes that Ivan speaks "always about 'slaves,' 'slaves,' and again 'slaves.' Though Kurbski discourses at length on the subject of 'prudent councillors' and a 'sinklit' [an advisory board made up of members of the nobility – D.Kh.], Ivan declines to recognize any such councillors, or to admit any possible advantages in such an institution as the one suggested. For him, there exist only men serving him at court – his court slaves."[91]

Unlike Klyuchevsky, Sharov held that Ivan genuinely believed in his sacred mandate to punish his subjects in ways that only God can. This idea, which would later become fundamental to the mystical turn in the historiography, had also been central to Snychov's rehabilitation of Ivan IV.[92] Another similarity between Sharov's and Snychov's notions is that, in defiance of well-established

facts, Sharov affirms that Ivan the Terrible was the first anointed Russian tsar and that the sacred ceremony of anointing equated him to Christ. Sharov's understanding of the Middle Ages as an epoch distinguished by "the amazing wholeness of its worldview, its certainty about the essence and the meaning of creation" and "a time of absolute truth"[93] also comes very close to that of Berdyaev.

There are other commonalities between Sharov's opinion and the mystical turn in historiography. He argues that Ivan IV viewed "Kurbsky's treason[94] not as the betrayal by a vassal of his suzerain but as a betrayal of God and the Orthodox Faith."[95] This argument is also fundamental to Snychov's and Froyanov's view of Kurbsky's actions. In tune with nationalist historiography and against ample evidence to the contrary, Sharov deems that "multiple plots against Ivan" had necessitated the launching of the oprichnina.[96] Building on his concept of Ivan's personality and his mystical motivations, Sharov posits that Ivan had wanted to unite Jerusalem and Rus in a new Holy Land under his rule. Gaining control over Livonia (the former lands of the German order, now part of Estonia and Latvia) was, to his mind, part of that geopolitical puzzle and the reason why Ivan needed a military-monastic order, which he "regarded as the solution to all his problems and the ideal organization" for a new Russian "military estate."[97]

From this perspective, the oprichnina was not a terrorist secret police inaugurated by Ivan to murder his subjects and confiscate their property at his discretion: it was, rather, an organization with a holy mission, a monastic order acting upon its members' best judgement and inspired by their true and sincere faith. Sharov concludes that Ivan was motivated by his sense of "responsibility for the destiny of Russia."[98] And it was the tsar's deep dissatisfaction with those who shared this responsibility with him that prompted him to introduce the oprichnina.[99] As we see, all these suppositions about Ivan's motivations – except perhaps the idea of uniting Russia with Jerusalem rather than claiming the Byzantine legacy of the Third Rome – come very close to Snychov's opinions about Ivan and the oprichnina. Sharov's notion about the centrality of the tsar's understanding of his holy mission as a point of departure for creating the oprichnina is also key to Snychov's advocacy of the oprichnina. In his journalistic articles, Sharov continues to call the oprichnina "a reform" and affirms that the ideology of Moscow the Third Rome positioned Russia as "a new Holy Land," and "Russian people as the single bearer of true faith, God's new chosen people, along with the Russian tsars, His Viceroys on earth."[100] This mission, according to him, "enabled the country to live in relative harmony for around a century and a half, and in particular, to reconstruct, with few losses, the tsardom after the Time of Troubles."[101] Hence, the oprichnina turns out to be a part of Russia's "harmonious past." It is hard to say with certainty whether Snychov was familiar with Sharov's treatment of the oprichnina, but he may have learned about it from an article by Sharov that was originally published in 1991 in *Rodina* (*The Motherland*), a journal with a nationalist reputation.

Sharov's take on the oprichnina had also been presented in several public lectures prior to 1991.

To better contextualize Sharov's construct, it should be added that a knightly order is one of the most widespread clichés in the Russian picture of medieval Europe. Even though some of those orders fought against Rus, for Russians they symbolize military efficiency and fidelity, this stereotype even prompting Stalin to call the Soviet Communist Party "the Livonian Brothers of the Sword."[102] Those tropes informed Sharov's concepts, serving there as an edifying metaphor for the oprichnina.

In his historical publications, Sharov challenges the foreign memoirists who left their testimonies about life in Alexandrovo sloboda, and expresses his "regrets" that they perceived this "monastery" to be evidence of Ivan's cynicism and taste for perversion:

> Foreigners' notes depicting life in the Alexandrovo sloboda have long been well known to historians; excerpts from them can be found in virtually any monograph devoted to the reign of Ivan IV. However, in these works, the Oprichny Monastery is used, unfortunately, only as a vivid example of the special perversion of the tsar. […] The history of the military-monastic orders, their role in maintaining and strengthening the power of the kings of Jerusalem, their splendid performance in combat could not but urge Grozny to the conviction that these advantages were primarily due to the intimate connection between the orders and military-and-monastic service. Religious orders must have seemed to Grozny an excellent solution to all the problems facing him, an ideal way of organizing the military class of the new Holy Land, which was Russia. An army, originally created exclusively to defend and disseminate the true faith, was exactly what Russia needed. The notes of foreigners describing life in Alexandrovo sloboda, the capital of the oprichnina, as well as the rights and privileges, on the one hand, and the restrictions that were imposed on the oprichniks, on the other, paint a picture very similar to the everyday life of military-monastic orders.[103]

This is how Klyuchevsky, following historical sources, describes the "pious life" in Alexandrovo sloboda:

> Likewise, the Tsar instituted there a wild parody of a monastery. Selecting three hundred of his most devoted oprichniki to form a "brotherhood," and himself assuming the title of "Abbot" (while he invested Prince Athanasius Viazemsky with the office of "cellarer"), Ivan clothed these State brigands of his in black cassocks and monastic skull-caps, awarded them a "charter of association" composed by himself, scaled the belfry each morning, with his sons, to ring for Mass, read the offices in church, sang in the choir, and made such profound obeisances to the altar that his forehead was always covered with bruises. Then, when Mass was over and the uproarious

> "brotherhood" were feasting and drinking in the refectory, the Tasr would improve the occasion by reading excerpts from the Fathers on the subjects of fasting and continence; after which he would dine alone, and follow that up by delivering a discourse on law, by going to sleep, or by repairing to the torture-chamber to be present at the "trial" of suspects.[104]

As Platt and Brandenberger demonstrate, the proposal that negative conceptions of Ivan IV were Western calumnies had become widespread during the Stalinist rehabilitation of Ivan IV.[105] Again, Sharov's view cleaves very close to the opinions expressed by Snychov and by Medinsky in his doctoral dissertation and his public statements.

With no significant proof, Sharov's article tries to dispute the concept, based on primary sources, of the oprichnina's "monastery" as a sacrilegious imitation of Church rituals, which relies on Klyuchevsky's definition of the oprichnina as a blasphemous masquerade.[106] In post-Soviet historiography, Sergey Bogatyrev, following Dmitry Likhachov, states that this "carnival" was "by no means a carnival in the Bakhtinian sense but was similar to the rituals of the Ku Klux Klan and the Sicilian mafia, or what Dmitry Likhachov has called the 'anti-world' of the Soviet camps."[107]

Sharov's 1991 article was republished in 2003, when the mystical turn was becoming a historiographical fad. Sharov's widow, Ol'ga Dunaevskaia-Sharova, recollects that Sigurd Shmidt (1922–2013), "a leading Russian specialist on the oprichnina," endorsed his work and agreed to publish it, on the grounds that "It's time to reclaim the priorities."[108]

I will explore Sharov's relations with Russian Orthodoxy and its sects below, where we will see that Sharov's prose and historical writings offer an interesting case of mobmemory formation. For now, the reader need only know that his patron, Sigurd Shmidt, was the son of Stalinist hero Otto Shmidt, whom Sharov's father, Alexander Sharov, a special correspondent for *Izvestia* during the Great Purges, may have known from his 1937 Arctic expedition. The younger Shmidt, Soviet historian and apparatchik, launched his career in 1939/1940 as a doctoral student working under Mikhail Tikhomirov on a popular topic of the time – Ivan the Terrible in Alexandrovo sloboda. Despite criticizing Stalinist approaches to Ivan the Terrible during the Brezhnev era, Shmidt argued against "dismissing the achievements of Soviet historiography" under Stalin. He condemns the oprichnina in his works, but in his public lectures in the 2000s, he remarked that Ivan lived in brutal times and compared his terror with the cruelties of Shakespearean drama and the beheadings perpetrated by Henry VIII. He describes the "theatricalization" of the oprichnina as a reflection of Ivan's character and maintains that Ivan was a true and sincere believer, despite his sadistic inclinations.[109] Shmidt's theories about the plots surrounding the death of Feodor Ioannovich, Ivan's son,[110] are consonant with the mystical turn in historiography and have, not surprisingly, been favorably mentioned by Froyanov. It is not impossible that Shmidt's ideas impacted how Sharov perceived Ivan.

Andrey Karavashkin and Andrey Yurganov's article "The Oprichnina and the Last Judgement," which is based on their previous works, was a distinctive juncture in the formation of the mystical turn and also provided an additional point of reference for the far right's ideological manipulations of the historical memory of the oprichnina.[111] The authors propose that we trust the sincerity of Ivan the Terrible and view him as a true believer whose policies were motivated by his faith. Ivan expected the Second Coming in 7070 (1562) and then in 7077 (1568 or 1569), and decided to help Russians prepare for Judgement Day by creating the oprichnina and granting them purgative torments on earth.[112] By connecting the oprichnina and the Orthodox doctrine of the Last Judgement, Karavashkin and Yurganov stress that eschatological beliefs in Russia were closely related to the nature of the tsars' power as God's anointed. Not the West but "all of Russian history, which had created a special type of sacralized monarchy, led him [Ivan – D.Kh.] to the idea of beginning his own fight against evil as he understood it."[113]

Karavashkin and Yurganov have been influenced by Aron Gurevich, a distinguished Russian medievalist and champion of the French *Annales* school of historiography in Russia. The *Annales*' "hermeneutic" approach, which follows German historicism, calls for the understanding of a given culture on its own terms. But the Annales school never applied this idea to murderous tyrants. Karavashkin and Yurganov, by contrast, used that approach to maintain that Ivan the Terrible was not prompted by his bestial instincts or hunger for unlimited power, but acted as he did because he believed that the oprichniks were "a righteous force of good, who execute[d] the will of their tsar and God."[114] According to them, Ivan sincerely tried to "establish true piety not only for the sake of the salvation of his own soul but also for the souls of those sinners whom he executed." The assumption that medieval people could not clearly distinguish between politics and religion prompts the authors to conclude that the oprichnina was a sacral and ritual phenomenon, a "mystery of faith," organized in the image of the Last Judgement rather than a reflection of rampant *Realpolitik* and despotic terror.[115] The authors' emphasis on the pious religiosity of the medieval consciousness, ostensibly understood on its own terms, here frames the centrality of eschatological motives as a vindication of egregious violence, for all that Yurganov labels Ivan a cruel tyrant in other works.[116]

Karavashkin and Yurganov, however, offer no explanation of the fact that the executions were usually so conducted as to withhold from the victims and their relatives the funeral rites deemed essential by the Orthodox Church for the salvation of the soul. Ivan even chose special methods of execution that would deny his victims salvation by rendering his dead victims "unclean."[117] The authors also fail to explain how the well-documented cases of torture, rape, and the killing of women and children fit into their picture.[118]

The popularity of the mystical turn in justifying the oprichnina has led other scholars to contest the Orthodox religiosity of Ivan and to posit instead that he

was swayed by the pagan traditions of ancient Rus. Ivan's "semi-pagan" religiosity assigned magic meanings to the tsar's proscriptions and his treatment of the dead. Andrey Bulychev furthered this argument by ascribing Ivan's donations to the Church for the commemoration of his victims to his superstitious nature.[119]

The mystical turn is actively promoted by several far-right post-Soviet historians who aggressively contend that the oprichnina was a crucial and positive component in Russia's defense of Orthodox Christianity against "the West." The oprichnina emerges from their pens as an organization that fulfilled Russia's mission under the guidance of a pious tsar. Igor Froyanov (1936–2020), former Dean of the History Department of Saint Petersburg State University and known for his far-right views, raised this trend to a new level. For most of his academic career, he specialized in the history of the Kievan Rus (ninth to twelfth centuries). He began publishing antisemitic books on Soviet history in the early 1990s,[120] and in the 2000s switched to Ivan the Terrible. Scathingly critical of Skrynnikov's take on the oprichnina and praising the oprichnina as a much-needed political institution whose backstory reaches into the previous century of Russia's history, Froyanov insists on the dual – religious and political – nature of the oprichnina.[121]

The common thread of tsarebozhie is not difficult to trace here. Its adherents routinely interpret "the Judaizer heresy" as a war waged by the West against Rus in the sixteenth century, which the oprichnina was formed to combat. Froyanov makes favorable mention of Snychov, who undoubtedly influenced him. For example, Snychov's claim that Lithuania and Poland exported the Judaizer heresy to Rus with the intention of perverting Russian Orthodoxy ultimately found its way into Froyanov's writings,[122] which have, in turn, become an important resource for Medinsky's notion of the West's perennial information war against Russia. The apologists of the new oprichnina had now received at least a modicum of the academic backing they needed.

Froyanov characterizes the oprichnina as the only way of thwarting a conspiracy aimed at changing the Russian religious and governmental system to match the model of the Western monarchies. Archpriest Silvestr and Alexey Adashev had been trying to impede Russian national development by limiting the tsar's autocratic powers and reforming the Russian Orthodox Church. Ivan, however, exposed this conspiracy against the Russian faith and the Russian state, and harshly punished both. Froyanov also denounces the boyars who, like Kurbsky, fled to Lithuania or Poland to escape Ivan's fury, and brackets Kurbsky, Silvestr, and Adashev together, for having "followed the commands of their Western masters" in seeking to impose the Judaizer heresy on Rus, with the aim of destroying "Russian Christianity." Froyanov concludes his book with a statement that echoes some of his earlier antisemitic claims:

> [The Judaizer sect's] activities, directed […] against the autocracy, the Apostolic Church, and the Orthodox faith, brought Russia to the brink of national catastrophe. In a nutshell, it was a question of effecting change

> tantamount to the elimination of those essential foundations of Holy Russia. The most drastic measures were needed to keep the Russian state from collapsing. The turn to the oprichnina became inevitable.[123]

Replete with modern ideological clichés and the journalistic idioms of Putinist propaganda, Froyanov's approach eloquently illustrates his intent to present the oprichnina as a legitimate scenario for contemporary politics. He blames "the West" for its attempts to "mar the Russian people with anti-Christian heresies." In an interview during the heated debates around Pavel Lungin's film *Tsar*, which I will examine below, Froyanov made his intention even more explicit:

> Ivan fought for religion, for the Church, and for the autocracy. And he could not have chosen otherwise, because these three elements are intimately interconnected. The oprichnina should be regarded as a countermeasure and as an institution that secured the state in that trying time.[124]

In a book published in 2006, Vyacheslav Shaposhnik, a professor at the St. Petersburg Institute of History (Russian Academy of Sciences), also endorsed the idea that Ivan IV was motivated in his politics by his faith and that the oprichnina was a necessary political measure to complete the creation of an Orthodox autocratic monarchy.[125] Significantly, among his sources of inspiration Shaposhnik names Ivan Snychov.

Ivan's Rehabilitation and Commodified Anti-Humanism

In the 2000s to 2010s, the oprichnina became a hot topic in historiography and a popular subject for academic dissertations in history.[126] Seen primarily through the lens of "the Orthodox Christian worldview," it haunts the publications of post-Soviet historians, one of which claims that Russia stands against a non-Orthodox world "drowning" in the ideology of consumption. Hence, to remedy this situation, Russia needs "a contemporary oprichnina," which possesses "a cosmic, universal" meaning, because Russia stands alone against the entire world.[127]

Moscow State University Professor Dmitry Volodikhin, an important voice of the mystical turn, has devoted his academic publications and media appearances to the defense of the oprichnina and the rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible.[128] In his 1994 book (co-written with Dmitry Alexandrov), Volodikhin followed Robert Vipper in arguing that the oprichnina was the result of a military reform designed to prepare the country for the Livonian war, which produced a skilled regiment capable of withstanding military aggression from "the West."[129] In 1997, to further justify his position, Volodikhin published a book dedicated to the memory of Robert Vipper that promoted the Stalinist version of Ivan's cult.[130]

In 1999, Volodikhin, who is also a science-fiction writer, founded the sci-fi group *Bastion*, which sponsors like-minded authors and positions itself as a conservative think tank. He numbers his organization among "the many attempts to correct public opinion with the help of a [SF] novel."[131] According to Suslov, *Bastion*

> not only produces fiction books but also serves as a hotbed for nonfiction manifestoes and policy papers fostering such values as imperial order, traditionalism, Orthodox fundamentalism, anti-globalization, monarchism, and nationalism.[132]

In the 2010s, Volodikhin continued claiming that the oprichnina was the outcome of a military and administrative reform, an emergency initiative to create a strong army under capable officers. Yet by this point, he was also admitting that the oprichnina later became a "terrorist organization" and that the oprichnina did terrorize its victims with some gusto, under Ivan's orders.

Over time, however, Volodikhin's position radicalized in step with the Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics. In 2018, he published a new biography, *Ivan IV, the Terrible, the Orphan Tsar*, to combat both "ultra-conservative" and "liberal" myths surrounding Ivan IV. An apologia for Ivan's brutality, this book reiterates that Ivan did not conceive the oprichnina as an instrument of terror. While admitting that it was indeed excessively cruel, that such cruelty cannot be justified, and that the oprichnina was ultimately an unsuccessful "reform," Volodikhin is still adamant that it was a useful institution, creating a much-needed social mobility that benefited Russia in the long run. Against all odds, he goes on to present Ivan as one deserving of the reader's empathy – a pitiful orphan, a frustrated artist, subjected to circumstances that, he implies, would have turned anyone vicious. Ivan's ferocious repressions are, in short, portrayed as the venting of a lonely, attention-seeking child.[133] Volodikhin's insistence on Ivan's artistic gift and miserable childhood is reminiscent of the portrait of a young Hitler in Menno Meyjes' film *Max* (2002), which caused quite a stir in Russia. In fact, the rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible is paralleled by representations of other murderous monsters in contemporary popular culture and academic discourse, including Stalinist perpetrators and Nazi criminals.[134]

Paying homage to Snychov, Volodikhin's 2018 biography of Ivan gives free rein to the conspiracy theory without providing any new historical evidence to back this up. As Skrynnikov has amply demonstrated and as Volodikhin acknowledged in his earlier books, there is no historical proof of boyar conspiracies against Ivan IV.

Volodikhin builds on Cherniavsky's thesis but takes it one step further by insisting that the oprichnina's terror was copied by Ivan from, if not imposed on him by, the "standards of his time." Because Russians are "kind by nature," mass repressions did not exist in Rus before Ivan IV, but Western Europe had already "infected Russia with the virus of violence": in other words, Ivan

learned cruelty from Torquemada, Mary Tudor, the Duke of Alba, etc. Like many post-Soviet far-right ideologists, Volodikhin speaks about the "essentially murderous nature of Western civilization" in his allegations against the West:

> Western Europe wanted to teach Eastern Europe a lesson: Kill! Kill some more! […] Don't be ashamed of the number of victims! Forget about the commandment "Thou shalt not kill"! In our Russia, this lesson seems to have been taken as a guide for action: Russian political culture was infected. The virus of mass executions entered it, lived and worked in it with varying degrees of intensity until very recently.[135]

Volodikhin's 2018 monograph, which echoes Medinsky's accusations that certain Western sixteenth-century memoirists created a malevolent "myth" of Ivan IV, has attracted several highly critical reviews. Viktor Dashevsky and Semyon Charny's review exposes many flaws in his argumentation, lambasting Volodikhin's dismissive and inaccurate account of historiography and his selective use of historical sources. This and other reviews deliver abundant proof that Volodikhin's opinions, especially regarding the influence of "Western European violence" on Ivan and the argument that he learned about terror from Europe, are groundless.[136] Konstantin Erusalimsky, for his part, points out how strongly Volodikhin's concept of the oprichnina was influenced by Snychov.[137] Nevertheless, as we will see, Volodikhin's interpretation of Ivan and the oprichnina still serves as "historical proof" in the discourse of far-right nationalists and other admirers of Ivan and enthusiasts of the new oprichnina.

The parallels between Snychov's ideas and the nationalistic, antiliberal discourse of Volodikhin, Froyanov, and other historians suggest that tsarebozhie gained a powerful second wind in the historiography of Ivan the Terrible and the oprichnina. Yurganov and Karavashkin's approach to Ivan has also been successfully co-opted into the nationalist idiom, as we will see below.

Alexander Filyushkin, also from St. Petersburg State University, has contributed to the mystical turn. Filyushkin develops Medinsky's speculations about foreign descriptions of Ivan's atrocities: he intimates that the Russian accounts of the oprichnina's horrors "are construed from foreign sources" and based on "rumor and legend." Applying the postcolonial discourse without openly quoting it and using the term "historical code of Muscovite Rus," which is reminiscent of Prokhanov's mystical "codes" of Russian culture, Filyushkin blames "European perceptions […] and values" for the distortion of Russia's image, because

> perceptions of the country were based on the codes and values of early modern Europe. At the very end of the fifteenth century, "Europe discovered Russia" by means of creating a whole complex of works about Russia – European Russia – made by foreigners. However, studies have shown that the information from those sources cannot be understood

> literally, and the context of their occurrence, distortion, and information transcoding has to be taken into account.[138]

Hence, it was Europeans who created the monstrous image of Ivan, which "is so powerful a stereotype that it is very difficult to break away from its influence."[139]

The post-Soviet mobmemory benefits especially from some claims made by international scholars. The writings of American historian Charles Halperin, a student of Cherniavsky, are arguably the best example of the mystical turn's internationalization. The rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible guides Halperin's 2019 monograph *Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish*, an ambitious study designed to cover "all aspects of Ivan's reign," which aims, much as Volodikhin's book did, to destroy the "myths surrounding Ivan."[140] Yet the commonalities between Volodikhin's and Halperin's approaches do not end there. Following Cherniavsky, Halperin supports the thesis that Ivan's rule in general and his terror in particular had many features in common with his European contemporaries, especially with Henry VIII of England, making Ivan, as Gary Saul Morson puts it in his review of Halperin's book, "bad, but no worse than other rulers of his time."[141] Halperin argues that the origins of the oprichnina, that stimulus to social mobility, are found in the rise of a new social group that he calls "the gentry," thus implicitly comparing it to the middle-ranking English nobility which, according to some interpretations, Henry VIII used in his struggle against the aristocracy. "Frustrated" and made "anxious" by economic and social pressures, the "gentry" oprichniks expressed their anxieties by unleashing terror.

Halperin's book received a mixed press in Anglophone scholarship. In a special forum organized by *Russian History*, the reviewer noted the inadequacy of his sources in sustaining his major claim: to ground Halperin's theory that "gentry oprichniki, contravening Ivan's intent, were responsible for unleashing mass terror," a wider inquiry into Muscovite history is needed.[142] Another reviewer points out that Halperin revives "Michael Cherniavsky's 'Renaissance Prince' paradigm." Specifically, he observes that Halperin questions the sources that describe young Ivan as a "monster in training."[143] Gary Saul Morson made similar observations.[144] Morson presents a persuasive argument that historians considered Ivan's politics arbitrary mainly because "they look for a certain kind of purpose," and "Ivan's main purpose was simply the ability to exercise his will without restraint." Comparing Ivan to Stalin, Morson argues that Stalin's insatiable desire for power at least had some ideological goals while Ivan's had none.[145]

Contrary to those critical reviews, two Russian historians – Andrey Dvornichenko, Froyanov's student and his successor as Dean of St. Petersburg University's History Department, and Vyacheslav Shaposhnik – have praised Halperin's book and his "new interpretation of the oprichnina." They admire in particular how Halperin's position differed from that of "all other Western scholars" in his "objective approach to this painful topic."[146] Dvornichenko and Shaposhnik's enthusiasm may be explained by the fact that an independent

American scholar is here expressing ideas resembling those that the Kremlin routinely employs in its neomedieval memory politics.

Ivan's rehabilitation resumed in Halperin's next book, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory Since 1991*. [147] Following Cherniavsky's apologia for Ivan and assuring his readers that the atrocities were commensurate with the historical epoch (without, however, referencing any historical sources on this occasion), Halperin's position comes very close to Volodikhin's and, as we will see later, to the reasoning of the theorists of the new oprichnina:

> Ivan was responsible for sufficient violent acts to justify labeling him cruel, but the evidence for sadism is dubious. […] [A] Muscovite description of an interrogation session gives the lie to foreign descriptions of Ivan's physical involvement in torture. Most atrocity stories about him, including accusations of rape, are clichés. The tsar's violence seems "worse" than that perpetrated elsewhere in sixteenth-century Europe – the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, the repression of the Dutch revolt against Spain, the Peasants' Revolt in Germany, the Spanish Inquisition – because historians consider his actions senseless and arbitrary, meaning that they cannot attribute them to such "rational" causes as religious bigotry, national hatred, or class war. This interpretation reflects no more than our ignorance of Ivan's motives.[148]

This logic is entirely consonant with the concept of the information war.[149] Halperin attributes the image of Ivan as "the God-ordained autocrat, fountainhead of justice and piety" to Russians during his reign and that of "a monstrous despot and tyrant" to anti-Russian war propaganda, pamphlet literature, Livonian chronicles, foreigners' accounts, and Kurbsky's *History of the Grand Prince of Moscow*. Yet, despite Halperin's stated aim of covering "the broadest possible spectrum of nonfiction publications in Russia on Ivan, in scholarly and non-scholarly monographs, textbooks, trade book surveys, and works of political advocacy," the book contains not one mention of Medinsky or his concept of the information war.[150] In fact, Halperin completely ignores Russia's official neomedieval promotion of Ivan while regretting that Ivan's "persona, his larger-than-life image, his charisma, remain invisible" to the "novice reader" in contemporary Russia.[151] In full engagement with Cherniavsky's admiration for Ivan, Halperin celebrates the tsar's personality and concludes his book by stating that Ivan "receives so much attention because the sources for his reign present us with a persona who demands so much attention," rather than because his reign was the first experiment with state terror in Russian history.[152] The justification of Ivan the Terrible draws Halperin to conclusions unusual for an American scholar but typical of Ivan's Russian admirers, leading him to contemplate the positive role of the consolidation of serfdom during his reign:

> Despite the ravages that Ivan inflicted on the elite via the oprichnina in the later years of his reign he did seek to ameliorate the effects of the economic collapse at least upon the gentry not just via tax relief but also by establishing the Forbidden Years, which sought to guarantee the gentry the labor force necessary for them to sustain their military service.[153]

Although Halperin is aware that Ivan the Terrible's canonization is advocated by the Russian ultra-nationalists and the followers of tsarebozhie fundamentalism,[154] he revives Cherniavsky's speculation that Ivan was an object of "popular veneration" in Muscovy,[155] even while granting that his evidence is not fully convincing.[156] In support of this view, he cites Shaposhnik, who openly attested to Snychov's influence on his works, and Volodikhin, another of Snychov's followers. Halperin shows solidarity with Volodikhin on many counts, while also labeling him "another Orthodox conservative," which does not prevent him from praising Volodikhin's works elsewhere as an example of non-partisan scholarship, demonstrating "a very high level of professionalism, objectivity."[157]

After referencing Snychov's bigotry, Halperin commends his "signature depiction of the oprichnina as Ivan's attempt to sift the wheat from the chaff." He praises Snychov, averring that his "status as an eminent hierarch and theologian is apparently above reproach in Russia" and adding that his academic credentials are confirmed by Volodikhin's having cited "his views respectfully."[158] Halperin's major conclusion is that Russian public opinion is divided about Ivan, although one wonders if an entire book was needed to state the obvious.[159]

An echo of the mystical turn in the historiography of the oprichnina is occasionally heard in Western writings dealing more generally with Russia–West relationships. Mark Smith's *The Russia Anxiety: And How History Can Resolve It* (which resolution may well have taken place on February 24, 2022) offers a good example of that tendency. Calling Ivan "Awe-inspiring" (rather than "Terrible") and pointing up the complexity of his rule and its results, Smith highlights Ivan's miserable childhood and emphasizes that the oprichnina gave him a chance to live separately from his enemies.[160] Smith characterizes the oprichnina as "early-modern, a recognizable fragment of Europe's sixteenth century" and compares Ivan the Terrible to Henry VIII and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.[161] The oprichnina "did not set up a historic highway for Stalinism, let alone Putin." This concept of the oprichnina works to prove his main thesis that "the Russia anxiety" – namely, Western fears and apprehension about Russia – is an illusory and basically groundless construct conceived by the West. Considering the war in Ukraine and Putin's constant nuclear blackmail of the West, this conclusion does not sound entirely convincing.

The intense exchange between the sectarian creed of tsarebozhie and the post-Soviet historiography of the oprichnina and the occasional resonance of this exchange in international historiography have contributed to a new

perception of medieval state terror. Tsarebozhie and the mystical turn have been instrumental in generating religious and pseudo-scientific justifications and support for mobmemory. Together, they have played a major role in normalizing state terror, propelled by the Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics, and "rectifying" the historical memory of the oprichnina, one of the most heinous episodes of Russia's past.

Notes

1 Mariëlle Wijermars holds that "the various conceptions of a new or neo-oprichnina penetrated the political mainstream only minimally, despite a plethora of conferences, lectures, roundtables, publications, and websites." Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia*, 173.
2 Serhy Yekelchyk, "The civic duty to hate: Stalinist citizenship as political practice and civic emotion (Kiev, 1943–53)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2006, 7/3: 529–56; Yekelchyk, *Stalin's Citizens: Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
3 Alexander Verkhovsky, "Politicheskoe pravoslavie v rossiiskoi publichnoi politike," *sova-centr.ru*, May 21, 2005.
4 Boris Knorre, "Dvizhenie za kanonizatsiu Ivana Groznogo i pravoslavno-monarkhicheskii tsezarizm," in *Religiia i rossiiskoe mnogoobrazie*, ed. Sergei Filatov (Moscow, St. Petersburg: Letnii sad, 2011), 512.
5 Alexander Verkhovsky, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie: russkie pravoslavnye natsionalisty i fundamentalisty, 1995–2001* (Moscow: Tsentr "Sova," 2003), 215; Pål Kolstø and Aleksander Shmelev, "Kanonizatsiia Ioanna Groznogo, Grigoriia Rasputina i uchenie o russkoi teokratii," *Pro et contra*, 2, Appendix 1, 175–82.
6 Knorre, "Dvizhenie za kanonizatsiiu Ivana Groznogo," 506. On the canonization of Nicholas II and his family as passion-bearers, see Suslov, "The Genealogy of the Idea of Monarchy in the Post-Soviet Political Discourse," 44.
7 Knorre, "Dvizhenie za kanonizatsiiu Ivana Groznogo," 524.
8 Alexander Dugin, "Metafizika oprichniny; russkiy orden," [March 2, 2005] *Evraziiskii souz molodezhi*.http://rossia3.ru/ideolog/nashi/russ_orden.
9 Alexander Dvorkin, *Sektovedenie: Totalitarnye sekty. Opyt sistematicheskogo issledovaniia* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Khristianskaia biblioteka, 2006).
10 "Chislo sektantov v Rossii dostigayet milliona chelovek," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, November 27, 2007.
11 Aleksander Shmelev, "Kanonizatsiia Ioanna Groznogo, Grigoriia Rasputina i uchenie o russkoi teokratii," *Religiia i SMI*, December 6, 2002. Scholars of Russian nationalism and of this movement were underestimating the neo-oprichnina's influence and the influence of Russian nationalism in general as early as 2014. Anastasia Mitrofanova, for example, stated explicitly that "Orthodox nationalism is […] declining in numbers" and "stagnating." Mitrofanova, "Russian Ethnic Nationalism and Religion Today," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, ed. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 114–15, 129. In 2014, Verkhovsky also believed that Russian nationalism was in decline. Verkhovsky, "Radical Nationalists from the Start of Medvedev's Presidency to the War in Donbas: True till Death?" in *The New Russian Nationalism*, 99–100.
12 The members of this movement call themselves "oprichniki." Boris Knorre, "'Oprichnyi mistitsizm' v religioznykh praktikakh 'tsarebozhnichestva'," in *Religioznye praktiki v sovremennoi Rossii*, eds. K. Russele and A. A. Agadjanyan (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2006), 384.

13 Under Alexy II, the Russian Orthodox Church's position against tsarebozhie was reflected in, for example, Georgii Korob'in, "Traktovka lichnosti Ioanna Groznogo v knige 'Samoderzhavie dukha,'" in *Iskushenie nashikh dnei. V zashchitu tserkovnogo edinstva* (Moscow: Danilovskiy blagovestnik, 2003), 216–34.
14 Metropolitan Ioann (Ivan Snychov), *Samoderzhavie dukha. Ocherki russkogo samosoznaniia* (1994) (Moscow: Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii Rodnaia strana, 2017). Verkhovsky argues that Snychov can be correctly called a fascist: Verkhovsky, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie*, 237.
15 Dushenov, an ardent nationalist who runs a journal and a TV channel named Orthodox Russia (Rus pravoslavnaia, https://rusprav/tv/), was convicted for his aggressive antisemitism in 2010. His trial was not directed against him as a tsarebozhnik, though. Nor did it mean that Putinism had decided to bring an end to Russian antisemitism. It could instead have been a public relations ploy to mollify the concerns of the Jewish community in Russia because in 2009, the Russian Federation had begun buying military equipment from Israel. Jared Feldschreiber, "An Alliance of Necessity: Putin's Russia Enjoys a Strategic Partnership with Israel," *Huffpost.com*, July 1, 2014. www.huffpost.com/entry/an-alliance-of-necessity_b_5534016. For more on Dushenov, see "Ekstremist za radi khrista," *Novaia Gazeta*, February 4, 2010.
16 The idea of Russia as katekhon first emerged in a circle of Russian Orthodox thinkers: Nikolay Vinogradov, *O konechnykh sud'bakh mira i cheloveka. Kritiko-ekzegeticheskoe i dogmaticheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia Katkova, 1887), 1324–39. On the prerevolutionary interpretations of katekhon and eschatological beliefs among clergy and conservative intellectuals, see Viktor Shnirel'man, "Antikhrist, katekhon i Russkaia revoliutsiia," *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom*, 2019, 1/2, 488–515.
17 On the Kremlin's use of tsarebozhie as its proxy, see "Zumery khotyat zhit'," *Kasparov.ru*, October 6, 2022. On the movements inside the Orthodox Church, see Grishaeva, "Making Europe Great Again," 234–56.
18 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 135; on Russia as a theophoric nation, 91. On Snychov's role in this movement, see Verkhovsky, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie*, 21–22.
19 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 75.
20 Boris Uspensky and Viktor Zhivov, "Tsar' i Bog: Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii monarkha v Rossii," in Uspensky, *Izbrannye trudy*, vol. 1 (Moscow: "Yazyki russkoi kul'tury," 1996), 208–209, see also 218, 243.
21 Verkhovsky, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie*, 62.
22 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 22, 168.
23 *ibid*., 10.
24 *ibid*., 189–90.
25 Erusalimsky correctly links this initiative to the circles close to tsarebozhie and to Snychov's admirers and argues that it was related to the question of Ivan's canonization. Erusalimsky, "Zachem nuzhny pamiatniki Ivanu Groznomu?"
26 "Poseshchenie Lebedinskogo gorno-obogatitel'nogo kombinata." See Vladimir Kara-Murza's reaction to Putin's statements: Vladimir Kara-Murza, "Putin: Ivan Groznyi ne detoubiitsa," *Radio Liberty*, June 20, 2017.
27 "Istoriki RVIO opровergli prichastnost' Ivana Groznogo k ubiistvu syna i obnaruzhili britanskii sled," *Panorama*, March 31, 2021.
28 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 231–32.
29 "Putin usomnilsia v versii ubiistva mitropolita Filippa Maliutoi Skuratovym v 1569 godu. Kak otmetil prezident RF, 'eto tol'ko odna iz versii,'" *TASS*, August 30, 2021; Dina Khapaeva, "Gde tak vol'no dushit chelovek," *Novaia Gazeta*, September 3, 2021.
30 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 198.
31 *ibid*., 199, 200.
32 Boris Uspensky, *Tsar' i patriarkh: kharizma vlasti v Rossii. Vizantiiskaia model' i ee russkoe pereosmyslenie* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 1998), 185. See also

Uspensky, *Tsar' i imperator: Pomazanie na tsarstvo i semantika monarshikh titulov* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2000), 27; and Marina Anatol'evna Yashina, "Patriarkh i tsar': etapy vozniknoveniia dvukh vetvei vlasti," *Vestnik Iuzhno-Ural'skogo gosudarstvennodo universiteta. Seriia: Sotsial'no-gumanitarnye nauki*, 2017, 17/2: 65–68.

33 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 220, also 223, 233.
34 *ibid*., 235, 216–17.
35 *ibid*., 223.
36 *ibid*., 240.
37 *ibid*., 234.
38 *ibid*., 238–39, 235.
39 *ibid*., 235.
40 Snychov, "Byt' russkim!" *Sotsial'noe sluzhenie Russkoi Pravoslavnoi tserkvi: Mul'timediinoe uchebnoe posobie*, eds. prot. V. Khulapa and I.V. Aster (St. Petersburg: SPbGIPSR, 2014).
41 Knorre, "Dvizhenie za kanonizaziiu Ivana Groznogo," 510.
42 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 242, 244.
43 On the Domostroy, see *The Domostroi: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, ed. Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
44 For Snychov, the essence of Russian social life is religious service. Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 495.
45 *ibid*., 15.
46 See Jeffrey Brooks and Boris Dralyuk, "Parahistory: History at Play in Russia and Beyond," *Slavic Review*, 2016, 75/1, 77–98. See also Eliot Borenstein, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
47 Anatoly Fomenko's books were translated into English and published in seven volumes. Anatoly Fomenko, *History: Fiction or Science?* (Paris, London, New York: Delamere).
48 For a critique of Fomenko's hoax, see *Otchet o deiatel'nosti Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk* (Moscow: Nauka, 2001).
49 Dmitry Volodikhin, "Fenomen fol'k-istorii," *Mezhdunarodnyi istoricheskii zhurnal*, 1999, 5.
50 https://rusinst.ru/ob-institute.html.
51 "Spokoinoi nochi, berdyshi. Kto i zachem pytaetsia reabilitirovat' 'krovavogo' tsaria Ivana Groznogo," *lenta.ru*, October 24, 2016.
52 Suslov, "The Genealogy of the Idea of Monarchy," 53.
53 Farida Rustamova, "Za veru, tsaria i prilichiia: kak Poklonskaia ostalas' odna v svoiei bor'be," *BBC*, November 13, 2017.
54 "Stanet li Putin imperatorom Rossiiskoi Federatsii," *MKRU*, March 15, 2017.
55 Nikolay Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo*, vol. IX, (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Grecha, 1821).
56 Nikolay Kostomarov, "Lichnost' tsaria Ivana Vasil'evicha Groznago," *Sobranie sochinenii N. I. Kostomarova*, vols. 14–16: *Istoricheskii monografii i issledovaniia* (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvo dlia posobiia nuzhdaiushchimsia literatoram i uchenym, 1905), 395–448.
57 Attempts to explain the idiosyncrasies of Ivan's rule by mental disease were undertaken in the late nineteenth-century historiography and resurface from time to time in post-Soviet historiography. For example, Sergey Bogatyrev advocated for a psychoanalytical approach to Ivan's personality and his motivations (Sergey N. Bogatyrev, "Groznyi tsar' ili groznoe vremia? Psikhologicheskii obraz Ivana Groznogo v istoriografii," *Russian History*, 1995, 22: 285–308). By 2020, Bogatyrev's views had evolved to embrace Michael Cherniavsky and Charles Halperin's ideas about Ivan's sincere religiosity: "Despite their different confessions, Ivan iv and

Philip ii were driven by aspirations for what they saw as original, simple, correct Christianity." Sergei Bogatyrev, "Ivan the Terrible and Philip the Prudent," *Russian History,* 2020, 47:11-35.

58 Robert Vipper, *Ivan Groznyi* (Moscow, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1944).

59 Kevin M.F. Platt, *Terror and Greatness: Ivan and Peter as Russian Myths* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 253.

60 Platt, *Terror and Greatness*, 189. See also Richard Hellie, "In Search of Ivan the Terrible," in Sergei Platonov, *Ivan the Terrible* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1974), i–xxxiv.

61 Alexey Tolstoy, "Rodina" (1941), in Tolstoy, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V.P. Szerbyi, vol. 6, (Moscow, 1972), 449. Stepan Veselovsky, who features later in this chapter, severely criticized Tolstoy's writings on Ivan, and especially his plays *Orel i orlitsa* (1942) and *Trudnye gody* (1943).

62 "Zapis' besedy s S.M. Eizenshteinom i N.K. Cherkasovym po povodu fil'ma *Ivan Groznyi*. 26 fevralya 1947 goda," in Iosif Stalin, *Sochineniia* (Tver': Informatsionno-izdatel'skii tsentr Soyuz, 2006), vol. 18, 433–40. For an analysis of the film, see Kevin M.F. Platt, "Gothic Ivan the Terrible in the 1920s: Iurii Tarich's *Wings of a Serf* and the Curious Case of Ignatii Stelletskii," *Russian Literature*, 2019, 106: 33–60; Joan Neuberger, "Not a Film but a Nightmare: Revisiting Stalin's Response to Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, Part II," *Kritika*, 2018, 19/1: 115–42; and Neuberger, *This Thing of Darkness: Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019). Here Neuberger states that Eisenstein does not advise his audience to see "the good in every villain." *This Thing of Darkness*, 304. The Stalin-era cult of Ivan is a very well-researched topic that I will not dwell on further here.

63 Sergei Platonov, *Ivan Groznyi* (Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Brokgauz-Yefron, 1923), 47.

64 Stepan Veselovsky, *Issledovaniia po istorii oprichniny* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1963).

65 Alexander Zimin, *Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo* (Moscow: Mysl', 1964).

66 Ruslan G. Skrynnikov, *Tsarstvo terrora* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1992), 523 (translated as Ruslan G. Skrynnikov, *Reign of Terror: Ivan IV* [Leiden: Brill, 2015]).

67 Skrynnikov, *Tsarstvo terrora*, 525.

68 *ibid*., 526.

69 *ibid*., 527–28.

70 Boris Florya, *Ivan Groznyi* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2009), 435.

71 Andrey Bulychev, *Mezhdu sviatymi i demonami: Zametki o posmertnoi sud'be opal'nykh tsaria Ivana Groznogo* (Moscow: Znak, 2005), 179.

72 Mikhail Krom, "Vdovstvuiushchee tsarstvo," in *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii 30–40-kh godov XVI veka* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010); *Rozhdenie gosudarstva: Moskovskaia Rus' XV–XVI vekov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018).

73 Krom, *Rozhdenie gosudarstva*, 198.

74 Alexander Yanov, *The Origins of Autocracy: Ivan the Terrible in Russian History*, trans. Stephen Dunn (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA, London: University of California Press, 1981).

75 This liberal tradition endures in contemporary post-Soviet scholarship. Vladislav Nazarov concurs with Skrynnikov, adding that the oprichnina revealed the functioning of autocracy as terroristic despotism (Nazarov, "Oprichnina," in *Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia entsiklopediia* [Moscow, 2014], vol. 24, 267).

76 Mikhail Krom, "'Zriachii mif,' ili paradoksy 'istoricheskoi fenomenologii," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2004, 4/68: 309–19.

77 Platt, *Terror and Greatness*, 263. Platt, however, agrees with Krom on the beginning of a "new season" for the historiography on Ivan the Terrible in the 1990s. He perceptively notes that these representations of the national past preserve

"long-dead voices, seemingly defunct interpretive positions, and obsolete formulations of collective identity alongside novel and innovative stances." Platt, *Terror and Greatness*, 261.

78 Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov': sovremennoe sostoianie i aktualnye problemy* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004). See also data on the observance of Orthodox rituals by Russians from the Levada Center: www.levada.ru/2018/04/02/velikij-post-i-pasha-4/.

79 On the influence exerted by the Stalinist vision of Ivan on post-Soviet historiography, see Kevin M.F. Platt, "Allegory's Half-Life: The Specter of a Stalinist Ivan the Terrible in Russia Today," *Penn History Review*, 2010, 17/2: 9–24. On Stalinist representations of Ivan, see also Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

80 For a review of psychological explanations of Ivan's rule in historiography, see Bogatyrev, "Groznyi tsar' ili groznoe vremia?"

81 Michael Cherniavsky, "Ivan the Terrible as Renaissance Prince," *Slavic Review*, 1968, 27/2: 196–97.

82 *ibid*., 211.

83 Edward L. Keenan, "How Ivan Became 'Terrible,'" *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 2006, 28/1–4: 531.

84 Daniil Al'shits, *Nachalo samoderzhaviia v Rossii: Gosudarstvo Ivana Groznogo* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 112.

85 https://berezin.livejournal.com/957252.html.

86 Vladimir Sharov, "*Problemy sotsial'noi i politicheskoi istorii Rossii vtoroi poloviny 16–nach. 17 v., v trudakh S. F. Platonova*" (Candidate dissertation; Voronezh State University, 1984).

87 Vladimir Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo: chto eto takoe?" *Rodina*, 1991, 1; Vladimir Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo: chto eto takoe?" in *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik*, 2003, ed. Sigurd Shmidt (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), 116–30 (further cited from this latter edition).

88 Vladimir Sharov, *Iskushenie revoliutsiei: Russkaia verkhovnaia vlast'* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2009).

89 Vasily Klyuchevsky, *A History of Russia*, transl. C.J. Hogarth (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1912), vol. 2, 96–101.

90 Sharov also expressed this opinion in his last book: Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opuylenie (vremia, mesto, liudi): Sbornik esse* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2018), 156.

91 Klyuchevsky, *A History of Russia*, vol. 2, 69.

92 "In teaching Russia that she lives under the control of God, not man, Ioann, as it were, seems to have been saying to everyone: 'Call me as you will – great prince of all Rus or Ivanets Vasil'ev, but tsar and God's anointed, responsible for all that occurs here, such am I, and none has the power to change that.'" Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 218.

93 Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opuylenie*, 143.

94 Prince Kurbsky, a close friend of Ivan's youth, escaped his wrath by fleeing to Livonia, thus arguably becoming Russia's first expatriate political dissident.

95 Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 125. Compare Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 198.

96 "Grozny tried to 'translate' the entire system of state relations to a religious foundation in a matter of years. This extreme acceleration of the reforms is associated with numerous conspiracies, as well as Russia's military failures, which attested not only to the dissolution of the old state system but, most importantly, to the fact that God had turned away from his chosen people." Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 126. Yet Skrynnikov and other scholars show that there is no credible evidence confirming the existence of those plots.

97 Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 127.

98 This viewpoint he repeated in a later article "Perepiska Ivana Groznogo (1530-1584) s Andreem Kurbskym (1528-1583)," in Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opuylenie,* 151. This article was first published in a different collection by Limbus Press, a publishing house known for its right-wing sympathies, in 2014.
99 "Ivan IV was decidedly unsatisfied with the whole range of relations that developed between him and those with whom he was forced to share responsibility for the destiny of Russia." Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 123.
100 Sharov, *Perekrestnoye opyulenie*, 257.
101 *ibid*.
102 Iosif Stalin, "O politicheskoi strategii i taktike russkikh kommunistov," in *Sochineniia*, vol. 5 (Moscow: OGIZ, 1947), 71.
103 Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 129. Compare this passage with Snychov's account in Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 217.
104 Klyuchevsky, *A History of Russia*, vol. 2, 79.
105 See the Shcherbakov memorandum translated and printed in Platt and Brandenberger, *Epic Revisionism*.
106 Vladimir Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 130.
107 Bogatyrev, "Groznyi tsar' ili groznoe vremia?" 302. Interestingly, in note 51 on this page, Bogatyrev also references Sharov's article, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo."
108 Ol'ga Dunaevskaia, "Kogda chasy ostanovilis'," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, eds. Mark Lipovetsky and Anastasiia de la Fortel' (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2020), 14.
109 Sigurd Shmidt, "Ivan Groznyi glazami sovremennikov. Vtoraia lektsiia." *Kul'tura* TV channel, August 2, 2015.
110 Shmidt, *Rossiia Ivana Groznogo* (Moscow: Mysl', 1999), 3.
111 Andrey Karavashkin and Andrey Yurganov, "Oprichnina i strashnyi sud," in *Opyt istoricheskoi fenomenologii. Trudnyi put' k ochevidnosti* (Moscow: RGGU, 2003), 68–115.
112 Andrey Karavashkin, *Russkaia srednevekovaia publitsistika: Ivan Peresvetov, Ivan Groznyi, Andrei Kurbskii* (Moscow: Prometei, 2000). In his previous works, Yurganov extrapolated that Ivan believed the Last Judgement would come in 1562 and created the oprichnina to preventively purge Russians of their sins. Yurganov's "Oprichnina i strashnyi sud," was incorporated into Yurganov, *Kategorii russkoi srednevekovoi kul'tury* (Moscow: Miros, 1998), 356–404.
113 Karavashkin and Yurganov, *Opyt istoricheskoi fenomenologii*, 87.
114 *ibid*., 103.
115 *ibid*., 103–104, 107.
116 See also Andrey Yurganov, "U istokov despotizma," in *Istoriia otechestva: liudi, idei, resheniia. Ocherki istorii Rossii IX–nachala XX v.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991), 34–75; Vladimir Kobrin and Andrey Yurganov, "Stanovlenie despoticheskogo samoderzhaviia v srednevekovoi Rusi (K postanovke problemy)," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1991, 4: 54–64; and Yurganov, "Oprichnina i strashnyi sud'. Criticizing the methodology of Karavashkin and Yurganov's "Opyt istoricheskoi fenomenologii. Trudnyi put' k ochevidnosti," Mikhail Krom associated their approach with that of historians, including Igor Danilevsky and A. Alekseeva, who had been paying close attention to the Ancient Russian religious consciousness and its eschatological beliefs since the 1990s. Krom, "Zriachii mif," 317. See also Vladimir Kobrin, *Ivan Groznyi* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1989).
117 The suggestion that Ivan IV used specific funeral rituals to transform his dead enemies into "the unclean dead," making the salvation of their souls impossible in accordance with Orthodox Church dogma, was investigated by Bulychev in *Mezhdu sviatymi i demonami*, 17.
118 The argument against Ivan's "sacred violence" made by Nancy Shields Kollmann is that its presumed purpose was to restore social equilibrium and stability. But the oprichnina took the destruction and violence "outside of the norm," rendering it

"arbitrary, short-lived, and fundamentally destabilizing." Kollmann, *The Russian Empire 1450–1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13, 27, 153–54.

119 Bulychev, *Mezhdu sviatymi i demonami*, 108–151.

120 See, for example, Igor Froyanov, *Rossiia. Pogruzhenie v bezdnu* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2002).

121 Igor Froyanov, *Drama russkoi istorii: Na putiakh k oprichnine* (Moscow: Parad, 2007); Froyanov, *Groznaia oprichnina* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2009).

122 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 165–68. Froyanov cites Metropolitan Ioann (Snychov) approvingly in *Drama russkoi istorii*, 62.

123 Froyanov, *Groznaia oprichnina*, 7.

124 "Igor' Froyanov: Lungin otsenivaet epokhu Ioanna Groznogo odnoboko i odnostoronne," *Russkaia liniia*, November 6, 2009.

125 Vyacheslav Shaposhnik, *Tserkovno-gosudarstvennye otnosheniia v Rossii v 30–80-e gody XVI veka*, (St. Petersburg: Sankt-Peterburgskii universitet, 2006). Shaposhnik's *Ivan Groznyi. Pervyi russkii tsar'* (St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2006), 456–58 clearly reflects Snychov's position.

126 Igor Danilevsky, for instance, "verified" Yurganov's hypothesis, arguing that annalists viewed Ivan the Terrible as a Jesus figure whose mission was to "purify" the Russians in advance of the Last Judgement. Danilevsky, "Semantika oprichnogo dvortsa i smysl oprichniny: K voprosu o sisteme dokazatel'stv v istoricheskoi rekonstruktsii," *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 2017, 48: 35. See also Aleksei Lagunov, Chetvertaia rossiiskaia 'oprichnina': mirovozzrencheskoe protivostoianie," *Vestnik Severnogo (Arkticheskogo) federal'nogo universiteta*, 2018, 5: 150–58; and Ivan Ivannikov, "Oprichnina: prichiny, soderzhaniye, posledstviya," in *Istoricheskaia i sotsial'no-obrazovatel'naia mysl'*, 2017, 9/3–1. See also a textbook, *Ivan Grozny i ego vremia: uchebnoe posobie*, eds. S.M. Kashtanov and L.V. Stoliarova (Moscow, Berlin: Direkt-Media, 2020).

127 Aleksei Lagunov, "Chetvertaia rossiiskaia 'oprichnina': mirovozzrencheskoe protivostoianie," *Vestnik Severnogo (Arkticheskogo) federal'nogo universiteta*, 2018, 5: 150–58.

128 Dmitry Volodikhin, *Oprichnina i "psy gosudarevy"* (Moscow: Veche, 2010).

129 D.M. Volodikhin and D.N. Aleksandrov, *Bor'ba za Polotsk mezhdu Litvoi i Rus'iu v XII–XVI vekakh* (Moscow: Avanta, 1994), 102. On the reprint of Vipper's book and Volodikhin's apologia for him, see Platt, *Terror and Greatness*, 254–56.

130 Dmitry Volodikhin, *"Ochen' staryi akademik": Original'naia filosofiia istorii R.Iu Vippera* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo URAO, 1997). On Vipper's resurrection in post-Soviet historiography, see Platt, "Allegory's Half-Life."

131 Mikhail Suslov, "Of Planets and Trenches: Imperial Science Fiction in Contemporary Russia," *Russian Review*, 2016, 75/4: 576–77.

132 Suslov, "Of Planets and Trenches," 567–68.

133 Dmitrii Volodikhin, *Ivan IV Groznyi: Tsar'-sirota* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2018), 172–73. On Ivan as a poor orphan see Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opuylenie*, 157–59.

134 See Dina Khapaeva, "Trendy Monsters: The Nazis, the Perpetrator Turn, and Popular Culture," *New German Critique*, 2021, 48/3: 65–98.

135 Volodikhin, *Ivan IV Groznyi*, *181*.

136 V.Yu. Dashevsky and S.A. Charny, "Mezh naukoi i mifom," *Ekspertiza*, 2019, 3/20: 245–67.

137 On the close ties between Volodikhin's and Snychov's concepts, see Erusalimsky, "Zachem nuzhny pamiatniki Ivanu Groznomu?"

138 Alexander Filyushkin, "In Search of a New Face for Muscovy," *Kritika*, 2021, 22/2: 388. Compare Vladimir Medinsky, "Ivan IV v skazaniiakh inostrantsev XVI–XVII vekov: utverzhdenie stereotipa," *Istoriia RF. Glavnyi istoricheskii portal strany*, November 23, 2020.

139 *ibid*., 393.

140 Charles J. Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).
141 Gary Saul Morson, "Truly Terrible," *The New York Review of Books*, February 27, 2020.
142 Janet Martin, "Pressure Cookers, Safety Valves, and Mass Terror during the Oprichnina," *Russian History*, 2020, 47/1–2: 78–90.
143 David Goldfrank, "Halperin's Heraclean Feat: Navigating the 'Reliable Sources' Challenge en route to Crafting a Book 'for all Seasons' and Modifying the 'Renaissance Prince' Paradigm," *Russian History*, 2020, 47/1–2: 49–57.
144 "Repeatedly minimizing Ivan's responsibility for his actions – while denying he is doing so – Halperin contends that the oprichnina's horrors were 'certainly not what Ivan intended,' but rather a 'by-product,' taking on a life of its own, as terror often does. I do not think one can be certain of Ivan's intentions, but this theory seems especially dubious. […] In the same spirit, Halperin maintains that although 'Ivan decided which tortures to apply, to whom, and with what frequency […] he never applied the fire or other instruments of torture himself,' as witnesses say he did. Halperin's only evidence for this is that 'physically torturing his subjects was probably beneath his imperial dignity.' Why would Ivan have found one beneath his dignity and not the other? Even if you believe that there is a difference between participating in torture and devising, ordering, and directing it, what moral difference is there?" Morson, "Truly Terrible."
145 "Stalin, too, used arbitrary terror, with people arrested by quota, and achieved the ability to do anything he liked. But, unlike Ivan, he did so to accomplish ideologically driven goals. Ivan wanted unlimited power for its own sake […] Several Dostoevsky characters strive to become what Ivan Karamazov calls 'the man-god,' a being whose will encounters absolutely no restraint: 'There is no law for God. Where God stands the place is holy.' That was the condition to which Ivan the Terrible aspired, not to realize any specific goal but as the supreme goal in itself." Morson, "Truly Terrible."
146 Andrey Dvornichenko and Vyacheslav V. Shaposhnik, "I snova Groznyi Ivan, ili O novoi knige amerikanskogo uchenogo," *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta: Istoriia*, 2020, 65/2: 633–45.
147 Charles J. Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 29.
148 *ibid*., 25.
149 Vladimir Medinsky, "Lektsiia Vladimira Medinskogo v Gosudarstvennom Istoricheskom muzee," *Pravmir*, October 6, 2016.
150 Despite his claim that "[n]ot only 'serious' works but all works about Ivan should be taken into account." Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory*, xii.
151 *ibid*., 177–78.
152 "Ivan IV strides through sixteenth-century Muscovite history as a giant, charismatic, a perfect magnet in Russian historical memory for all of the aspirations and desperation of Russia's past, present, and future. It is no wonder that since 1991, Ivan has remained the center of attention, the fulcrum around which every conceivable interpretation of Russian history rotates." *ibid*., 247.
153 Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory*, 129. The Forbidden Years were periods when serfs were prohibited from relocating. The arbitrary application of this rule ultimately bound the serfs to the land and its owners, leading to the complete enslavement of the Russian peasantry from 1581 onward.
154 Halperin has good reason to assert that "the politicization of Ivan's image seems to be assumed by his defenders and critics alike and infuses studies of Ivan's personality and reign with an anachronistic orientation" (*ibid*., 246). But he arbitrarily categorizes the historians whose works he approves or disapproves of, classifying them in their relation to Ivan as "hostile," "confused," etc. His list of "hostile" historians begins with Skrynnikov, one of the most respected opponents of his and

Cherniavsky's views, whom he compares, without substantiating his claims, with Anatoly Fomenko, the notorious historical hoaxer. "Some specialists view Skrynnikov's analysis [of the oprichnina] as not much more satisfactory than Fomenko and Nosovskii's" (*ibid*., 42). "Karamzin's two Ivans and Skrynnikov's multiple phases of the oprichnina constitute only the tip of the iceberg of approaches to the image of Ivan the Terrible structured upon multiplicities" (*ibid*., 42). He also compares Skrynnikov's analysis with that of the right-wing extremists, without substantiating these allegations that contradict Skrynnikov's works and his consistently liberal political position (*ibid*., 95).

155 *ibid*., 51.

156 "[T]he canonization camp thus advances more convincing evidence that some Russians viewed Ivan as a saint in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than Cherniavsky did for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (*ibid*., note 53, p. 65).

157 *ibid*., 181. Although Halperin knows that Volodikhin was heavily influenced by Snychov's tsarebozhie (*ibid*., 67), that does not prevent him from categorizing Volodikhin among Ivan's hostile critics, likely because Volodikhin's 2018 biography of Grozny is absent from Halperin's bibliography, which generally does not extend past the 2010s.

158 Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory*, 28. After paying his respects to Snychov, Halperin spends many pages rejecting Anatoly Fomenko's much-criticized fiction about Ivan, no doubt because it allows him to distance himself from the tsar's idealizers. *ibid*., 39.

159 *ibid*., 250.

160 Mark Smith, *The Russia Anxiety: And How History Can Resolve It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

161 *ibid*., 160-161.

4

THE POST-SOVIET FAR RIGHT ON ESTABLISHING THE NEW OPRICHNINA

François Furet states that terror (the state policy, not the individual terroristic act) "cannot be reduced to its historical circumstances" because terror is also "a political idea."[1] In other words, it is in part owing to the discourse on terror that terror becomes a political program, as it did in the run-up to the French Revolution, when, Furet tells us, the discourse on terror emerged before the real terror began.[2] This has also been true of more recent instances of state terror, in that the Soviet and Nazi terrors were also conceived prior to their implementation. The current proposals for introducing and implementing terror – the new oprichnina – are analyzed in this chapter.

Theories on the new oprichnina are central to many Russian far-right ideologists because they view it as a means to recreate the society of estates and rebuild the Russian Empire. But unlike the Bolsheviks, they never compare the state terror of their dreams with the French Revolution: the Revolution of 1789 put an end to the absolute monarchy and the estate society, both of which they want to restore. Also, unlike the mystical turn in historiography, they understand the oprichnina not as a historiographical concept but as a part of their political platform, which is one reason why they freely mix and match the historical oprichnina and the new oprichnina to which they aspire.

For the Russian far right, the new oprichnina represents not a state of exception but a key systemic element of Russian society "as it should be." Its implementation is frequently brainstormed at the Izborsky Club, whose discussions on that point revolve around the betrayal of the Russian national interest by the corrupt elite and the liberals. The club's ideologists consider the oprichnina an invaluable national experience and a "lesson of history" from which politicians should learn. The idea of mobilization around the autocrat to save the true Orthodox religion and Russia from the Antichrist is as fundamental to their thinking as it is for tsarebozhie.[3] And even while their goals in introducing the oprichnina may

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sometimes vary, their projects are united by a belief in the positive role of terror. They cannot envision Russia's future without it.

Although many Izborsky Club members share an admiration for the oprichnina, the neo-Eurasians and the Institute for Dynamic Conservatism (IDC) are most active in conceptualizing how to put this "promising instrument" of social change into practice. "The cross-pollination of ideas" among Izborsky Club activists, the mystical turn in oprichnina historiography, and tsarebozhie exposes the mechanisms of mobmemory formation around the concept of terror or the new oprichnina.

Neo-Eurasian "Reactionary Modernization"

The neo-Eurasian discourse on the neo-oprichnina resembles the views of the rest of the Izborsky Club in many respects: the oprichnina is the motive force that ushers in the neomedieval future: "[O]ur Eurasian project […] could be called the neo-oprichnina."[4] The neo-oprichnina, a notion closely associated with neo-Eurasian Alexander Dugin, was already in the air by 2000, when he published his article "Dawn in Boots."[5]

Defining the neo-oprichnina as "Russian reactionary modernization," a "conservative revolution," and "an anti-Western mobilization," Dugin, like several other Izborsky Club members, wants to make sure that no one will confuse it with Western modernization.[6] The apparent paradox of "reactionary modernization" should not, as sometimes happens, mislead anyone into thinking that the neo-Eurasians or other Russian far rightists have any actual modernizing intentions. As Ilya Kalinin points out, "modernization" in the post-Soviet context is fixated on the past, not on the future.[7] Since Russia's backwardness has long been a common trope in Russian history textbooks describing pre-Petrine Russia, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union, and the present day, post-Soviet nationalists often feel stigmatized by it and have therefore co-opted the positive connotations of "modernization" while embracing none of its true meaning. But the neomedieval Russia of the future, the Russian nationalists claim, will certainly not be "backward." It will, rather, be just as advanced as the West while differing from it.

According to Dugin and several other neo-oprichnina theorists, the oprichnina is an eternal archetype, ever present in the Russian consciousness, that can be activated at crucial junctures in Russian history. Stalinism, for instance, was just another manifestation of this archetype. Dugin, out in search of Russian history's "mysterious codes" like the far-right writer Alexander Prokhanov, finds them in the oprichnina. As mentioned above, the neo-oprichnina is not regarded by Dugin or by other members of the Izborsky Club as a "temporary measure" or "state of exception": it constitutes the core of his social project and of his vision for Russia's future social system. It is, therefore, unlikely that he is using the term metaphorically, as some scholars seem to think.[8]

Dugin describes the neo-oprichnina as "a new caste, a new social stratum" that is needed to "put the country on the rails of patriotism."[9] The oprichniks will form "a pure caste" – a term that Dugin repeatedly uses in his writings – or an elite estate, the central element of neomedieval Russian society, and "the backbone of a Eurasian renaissance."[10] For Dugin, as for Sharov and Snychov, the neo-oprichnina is a knightly order and a secret society marked by an "alternative sacrality."[11] His reinterpretation of the oprichnina in terms of a mystical order with "a terrible gnosis" distinguishes it from the other programs that will be analyzed below: occult Gnosticism plays an essential role in Dugin's schemes. His "terrible sacrality" finds clear parallels in Froyanov's and Yurganov's writings, which Dugin respectfully references in his texts.[12] And why is the oprichnina sacred? Because the oprichniks serve Moscow, the Third Rome, the "sacred Russian Empire," and will be instrumental in regaining its lost lands and conquering the Eurasian continent.[13]

Like Snychov, Dugin projects medieval history onto today's events: Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina was a "response to a Western threat," and sixteenth-century Livonia was "analogous to NATO."[14] There are similar statements, too numerous to mention, in the writings of other Izborsky Club members, whose aim is to instigate a "great war between continents" – which has been Dugin's desire from the beginning of his political career – and destroy "the agents of foreign influence" at home.[15]

Dugin also espouses the idea of *katekhon*, most likely borrowing it from Snychov. For both, only the Russian tsardom and the Russian tsar stand in the Antichrist's way, and Ivan the Terrible was the first tsar to grasp the true mission of the chosen Russian nation:

> Ivan the Terrible obviously understood his rule as the culmination of world history. The fall of Constantinople meant the approaching of the Apocalypse for the entire Orthodox world. Only one thing stood in the way of the antichrist – the Russian tsardom and the Russian tsar. Humanity's destiny […] depended on Russia. [For Ivan,] [t]he Russians became the chosen people, the Russian Church became the last bastion of true Orthodoxy, and Russian statehood became the last obstacle before world's final apostasy. […] Hence the mystical and mysterious nature of the reign of Grozny, which took place as the last rehearsal of the Last Judgement.[16]

Following the tsarebozhniks, Dugin wants to canonize Ivan the Terrible, but he goes one step further than Snychov in defining katekhon. He lays down an even more global claim: for him, the Orthodox tsar and tsardom become the centerpiece of the world drama and the only threshold separating the entire world from the Apocalypse. Importantly, the Orthodox tsar becomes a universal ruler:

> From the Orthodox point of view, the tsardom and the tsar, the emperor, the *basileus* play a central role in sacred history. As long as there is a tsar,

> a restraining katekhon, then the son of perdition, the Antichrist, cannot enter the world. As long as the Orthodox kingdom stands, the end of the world cannot come. But not every ruler is a katekhon, only a tsar, anointed and consecrated by the Orthodox Church as the universal Christian Emperor. Ivan the Terrible was just that – the first Russian tsar, the first full-fledged Russian katekhon. Under him, Russia became the Third Rome. […] Ivan the Terrible did more than strengthen our state, advance its borders, repulse the attacks of dangerous enemies, and defend the country. He was a holy tsar who reflected the full weight of the mission entrusted to him. To be the Third Rome, to be a katekhon, is a test more fearsome than death; it is a responsibility; it is an incredibly difficult feat. […] People worship and obey the sacred tsar, God's anointed, just as he himself worships and obeys the highest superhuman powers – the Angel of Death. He humbly entrusts his prayers to him and asks him to pass them higher up the hierarchy, to the treasure of the uncreated Light.[17]

Dugin calls Ivan "the true name of Russia" and proclaims that under his rule, Russians recognized themselves "as agents of history, the vehicles of an independent civilization and a worldwide universal mission – to be the defenders of the Orthodox faith and the Orthodox kingdom, the Empire."[18] "Holy Rus" becomes, thanks to Ivan, "a katekhon, the last bastion of truth and love in the face of universal apostasy and the world of the Antichrist"[19] (Snychov's formula, constantly repeated by the Russian far right).

Like Froyanov, whom he praises as a "great scholar," Dugin does not care that Ivan the Terrible could not think in terms of "world history" because such a concept did not exist in his time. He references Yurganov's interpretation of Ivan's rule to give his writings some academic credibility.

The evolution of Dugin's idea of the neo-oprichnina mirrors the formation of mobmemory. In his 2000 article, his "new oprichnina" was indistinguishable from the old Stalinist NKVD/KGB, except for its extra layer of fascistic mysticism. At that time, the only way he could describe his new oprichnina was as a "Total Secret Service," a new caste formed from KGB agents, and "the passionaries [*passionarii*, probably a borrowing from Lev Gumilev – D.Kh.] of the new KGB," whose powers and privileges in peacetime were to equal those of the military high command in war.[20] By 2005, the veneration of Ivan the Terrible as tsar, as "a classical Eurasian leader," and as a sacred and mystical figure had replaced the KGB in Dugin's oprichnina fantasies, as the rising prominence of Ivan IV among Orthodox extremists likely incited him to join the ranks of his admirers.[21] Ivan the Terrible's palace in Alexandrovo had even been chosen as the site of the inauguration of the Eurasian Youth Movement to honor Ivan IV, the true Eurasian tsar, whom Pavel Zarifullin, co-founder of the neo-Eurasian movement, called in his speech to attendees "the official leader" of the Eurasian Youth Movement:

> Our gathering here – in the palace of Ivan the Terrible, for the creation of the Eurasian Youth Union in the heart of the oprichnina […] – is not an accident. We are asked: How can you restore the oprichnina if there is no autocrat? But we have an autocrat – Ivan Vasilievich the Terrible, who was the Eurasian of his era. Surrounding himself with Tatars and representatives of other peoples, he began a war with the West and concluded an alliance with the East. He is our formal leader, chief of the Eurasian Youth Union.[22]

Fourteen years later, the monument to Ivan the Terrible was unveiled in Alexandrovo to symbolize the success of political projects promoting the new oprichnina that back in 2005 had been mere pipedreams. Since then, the new oprichnina has ceased to be a stunt orchestrated by marginal extremists and has escalated to the level of political theory, memory politics, and a far-right blueprint for Russian society.

A "Virtuoso Politics"

Admiration for the oprichnina looms large in the writings of Vitaly Averyanov, a religious writer and co-founder of the IDC. Since the early 2000s, Averyanov has been an active participant of *pravoslavie.ru* (originally, pravoslavie-2000), an information platform of the Sretensky monastery, which was led by Tikhon, then archimandrite, and now metropolitan of Pskov and Porkhov, and allegedly Putin's confessor.[23] Averyanov supports tsarebozhie and is close to its inner circle. Like the tsarebozhniks, he asserts that "the oprichnina is the truth of sixteenth-century Russia. The spirit of the oprichnina is also true today, and it even provides answers for today's tasks."[24] Ivan "crowns the Russian miracle of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" because he shaped the Russian autocracy, conquered new lands in Siberia and the Volga region, and effectuated the transition from ancient Rus to the Russian Empire. Under him, "the powers and territory of the Russian state grew exponentially."[25]

Averyanov views the oprichnina as instrumental in the restoration of the Russian Empire:

> The spirit of the oprichnina corresponds well to today's situation. […] If under Ivan the Terrible the oprichnina denoted the creation of the Empire, today it will manifest its re-creation. We have experience of reconstructing empire, for the USSR was built after the Russian Empire's collapse.[26]

For Averyanov, Ivan the Terrible is a symbol of "Russian creativity": he crafted the concept of the Russian Empire and created the oprichnina, understood as an ideology of "selfless service to the state."[27] Averyanov calls the oprichnina a "virtuoso politics" that resulted in "the autocracy's masterpiece."[28] Ivan the Terrible is the Russophobes' favorite target because he embodies for the West

"that horrifying phenomenon of the Russian alternative, commensurate with the West in terms of race, culture, and religion […], an incarnation of the accursed Byzantium."[29]

Averyanov believes that Ivan's most significant innovations, those that led to empire-building, lie in the social sphere. The oprichnina enabled Russia to pass from "a clan model" to a model of empire.[30] According to him, the oprichnina, whose prime target was "the oligarchs," constituted a "popular referendum" that invited people to pick a side. Reviving the Stalinist schema, he indicates that terror resulted in "a union between the supreme power with the masses against the rivals for supreme power." Hence, the oprichnina provided a "strategic victory" to Ivan: it delivered sovereignty and formed a new estate ready to serve the national-imperial unity by "conviction, terror, and violence, or simply by destroying those who could not be convinced."[31]

In Averyanov's interpretation, the main goal of Ivan's oprichnina was to change the social structure: "It was a consistent social transformation, and all other innovations were inspired by it and formed around it."[32] And the new oprichnina of his dreams would be expected to play the same role. Today's Russia lives under oligarchs – latter-day boyars, corrupt proponents of decentralization – and the oprichnina is the only way to end this catastrophic situation.[33] It will ultimately come and "shake the country out of its vampiric trance."[34]

The rejection of "declarative humanism" lies at the core of Averyanov's views. Mocking liberal claims that Russia usually pays a huge price in human lives for the denial of humanist values, he ridicules "humanism" and refutes the exceptional value of human life.[35] In step with other members of the Izborsky Club, Averyanov's writings tend to be strongly in favor of terror, bloodshed, and mass violence, because "even executions carry a religious, spiritual light within them." The upcoming Russian "modernization" – the new oprichnina – will make time run backward. It will "challenge this system, pick through the little people" (*perebrat' liudishek*, Ivan IV's way of speaking about executions), and establish a new social order. [36]

Averyanov's construction relies heavily on the mystical turn in historiography. Confronting the "anti-oprichnina myth," by which he means the liberal historiographical tradition, Averyanov grounds his notions in the writings of "renowned historians" – Froyanov, Andrey Fursov (whose views are examined below), and Daniil Al'shits. Averyanov indulges himself in conspiracy theories about the Novgorodians' plots against Ivan and repeats an argument that the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the Spanish Inquisition, etc. inflicted much greater terror on the innocent. He feels a particular affinity with Froyanov's antisemitic statements about the "Jewish heresy," which was a "part of the ideological war mounted by the West against Russia." Ivan defended the true Orthodox religion against this heresy, and the oprichnina "burned that virus to the ground." A true believer and good tsar, Ivan did not distinguish between his enemies and the enemies of his people, because for him, he and his people were one.

Averyanov further labels the oprichnina's victims as incorrigible recidivists.[37] These "enemies of the people" were "a blockage in the flow of his people's life."[38] To minimize the number of Ivan's victims, Averyanov posits, with no proof whatsoever, that the terror victims were counted together with those killed by the Novgorod plague.

Yurganov and Karavashkin's interpretation[39] also serves him well in revealing the oprichnina's "spiritual side," whereby Ivan tortured and murdered his victims to save their souls. However, he criticizes both Yurganov and Karavashkin for not being able to penetrate the authentic mystic experience of the "true Orthodox believer" and for overstating the metonymic, metaphorical, and symbolic character of the oprichnina.[40] In unison with Vladimir Sharov, Averyanov claims that Ivan's oprichnina was "a brotherhood of a knightly type," showing once again that the Russian far right does not scruple to employ the Western chivalric tradition in supplying the oprichnina with an uplifting aura.

"Russia's Only Salvation"

For Andrey Fursov, a specialist in Asian and African studies and a member of the Izborsky Club, the oprichnina is "the most falsified event of our history."[41] Fursov is here catering to an idea that proliferated in far-right writings during the late 2010s, namely, that the oprichnina is a guiding principle of Russian history.[42] Manifesting itself through the three stages of "Russian modernization" – that of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Stalin – and renaming itself, from oprichnina to Cheka to GPU, the oprichnina's process of "emancipating power from property" and "actualizing the will to unalloyed power" represents the essence of Russia and is eternal.[43] This idea clearly resonates with a typically fascist cult of power: fascist overtones are as explicit in Fursov's writings as they are in Dugin's, Snychov's, Kalashnikov's, et al. Fursov proclaims that historically, the oprichnina fulfilled "its function of horrifying and terrorizing," and resolved the opposition between the populist, autocratic, national, and oligarchic principles of governance. It incarnates true Russian democracy as opposed to the false democracy of the West. Fursov maintains that without the oprichnina, the Russian state and Russian autocracy would have never been created, and praises Ivan for having centralized, for the first time in history, the Russian lands and government.[44] In Fursov's view, the oprichnina is creativity itself.

Fursov calls Ivan "a brilliant technocrat" who invented the oprichnina to centralize the Russian state and defend Russia's sovereignty, "a social engineer of genius," and "the greatest author of Russian innovation." Hence, because of his achievements, Ivan has been the most libeled Russian tsar, which explains the role he plays in the information war waged against Russia by the liberals and the West.[45] In concert with many of his Izborsky Club comrades, Fursov revives Stalin's view of the oprichnina and alleges that, functioning as it did in the interests of the people against the social elites, it was Russia's unique road

of anti-Western development and a "complex mechanism of social governance," which offset Russia's lack of "the warrior estate typical of other Indo-European nations."[46] Its greatest accomplishment, by dint of the extraordinary nature of its authority, which it exercised "extrainstitutionally yet legally[,] […] was the rapid redistribution of power and property."[47]

Fursov expects a twenty-first-century oprichnina, "a bitter, dangerous remedy," to punish not only those guilty of post-Soviet corruption; there will be innocent victims as well.[48] But given the present "time of troubles," the oprichnina, this "sacral principle of Russian history," is the only remedy for the situation. His ear on "the Music of History," he awaits a "global catastrophe," because without the oprichnina, "Russia will perish." The Fourth Rome and a New Empire is Russia's path into the future, and it will be paved by "the new knowledge of the secret and open enemies of Russia and Russians all over the world"; the Nazi and Stalinist ideologies provide a model for a "creative Spetsnaz," that will enforce these transformations.[49] A vision of the "Fourth Rome under the glowing rune of Victory" ends his neo-Nazi elegies.[50]

Like many of his fellow Club members, Fursov views terror as a universal cleansing tool to be wielded against his compatriots, whom he addresses in the following terms: "Remember, you cattle, that you are people."[51] He often admiringly repeats Ivan's trope of "picking through the little people."[52]

According to Fursov, the oprichnina altered the Russian people's "psycho-historical code" that shaped the unique Russian national character. His belief in a "secret code" – of Russian history, the Russian nation, etc. – pays homage to Prokhanov's writings. Another of his evident influences is Froyanov, whom he calls "an outstanding historian" and whose insistence that the oprichnina was institutionalized to counter a Jewish conspiracy and conduct a sacred war against attempts to corrupt Russian Orthodoxy through its heresies he retails in his own publications.

An inferiority/superiority complex vis-à-vis the West burdens the Russian far right. Misapplying Mikhail Krom's argument, Fursov claims that under Ivan IV, Russia became a European state on a par with other European states of the time. Volodikhin's thesis that the oprichnina was nothing in comparison to "what Ivan's contemporaries did in Western Europe" leads Fursov to conclude that "Ivan's deeds look moderate." The anti-Western post-colonial discourse is also appropriated by Fursov, in his claim that defaming Ivan IV apparently "helps the West whitewash itself of the crimes of inquisition, religious terror, and colonization."[53] To further justify Ivan's oprichnina, Fursov merges Michael Cherniavsky's constructs with the thesis of the West's inherent cruelty:

> [R]eligious wars were waged in Europe with such bloodshed as Russia had never dreamed of. Exceptional cruelty, up to and including the aestheticization of death, was a characteristic feature of the West. A traveler entering a medieval Western European city was greeted by corpses on gallows. Nothing of the kind has ever happened in Rus. […] The sixteenth century in general was

> an extremely cruel time. Ivan the Terrible was less cruel than his time, especially given that he had to defend himself.[54]

Unsurprisingly, Fursov is also a vocal supporter of the war in Ukraine, which he claims was engineered by "British Russophobia."[55]

Thirty Million "Degenerates"

In September 2009, Maxim Kalashnikov, co-founder of the IDC, wrote an open letter to President Dmitry Medvedev, in response to the latter's article "Russia, Forward!"[56] It was a running joke among Russian liberal journalists that Medvedev had "accidentally" picked Kalashnikov's letter out of many thousands of responses, and in a meeting aired on Channel One Russia had instructed Sergey Sobyanin (deputy prime minister at the time) to look closely into its main ideas.[57] These included praise for fascism and a request to bring back the oprichnina. Kalashnikov, who has never concealed his fascist and antisemitic views, actually asked Medvedev to establish an oprichnina and bestow upon it its rightful lands, with a capital in Novosibirsk. He further developed these ideas in other writings, where, for instance, he muses about Futuropolises, the cities of the future.[58] Their prototype is the Soviet "closed cities," which had no names, only numbers, and sometimes accommodated a large civilian population whose right to communicate with people living elsewhere was, at best, restricted. Kalashnikov wants to see military Futuropolises at the heart of the new oprichnina.

Social reorganization is clearly central to Kalashnikov's understanding of the new oprichnina. One of its primary goals will be to create a new estate – the oprichniks, the epitome of an autocratic monarchy. The rest of society will live under the control of this militarized caste of "warriors," who will constitute "a dictatorship of honest, clever, and competent people over the thieves, the stupid, and the incapable," to "fulfill Stalin's mission: ideology, development plans, and high-quality human resources above all."[59] "Self-sacrificial and altruistic," the oprichniks are to form "a tight-knit community that controls the state administration, occupies key state positions, and appoints judges, prosecutors, and members of the secret services and police." This corporation of "strict but just judges" will co-opt members from all classes, using "new psychotechnologies" to exclude sadists.[60] The oprichnina will create "a system of parallel governance, with its own army and secret services."[61] The oprichnina is "Russia's national salvation."[62] It will "rebuild Russia, and generate a 'supernew Russia' and a 'supernew' Russian nation."[63] Using Nazi Germany and the communist USSR as his policy models,[64] Kalashnikov prophesies the Slavic people's future world dominance.

Kalashnikov's take on the evolution of the state blends in well with that of his comrades in the IDC: the oprichnina, as a dynamic element of the conservative Russian state, would impel it forward as the SS had done in Nazi

Germany and "post-masonry, the closed network that stands behind the government in the USA," was currently doing.[65] To him, the Skolkovo Innovation Center near Moscow, a tax-exempt entity that is served by private police departments, exemplifies the new oprichnina. In an interview with *Radio Liberty*, Kalashnikov confirmed his sympathies with fascism, which he also expressed in his above-mentioned letter to Medvedev, stressing especially his admiration for fascist "demographic policies":

> I support Konstantin Leontiev's philosophy. I used to be a fan of Nietzsche's. I highly value Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin, and I think that there was a lot of valuable experience in Germany in the 1930s that we can now apply. And not only in the economy, by the way, but also in demography, in the training of young people. If you consider it fascism, well, call it what you like. […] But in fact, both fascism and communism are the future of the world.[66]

Kalashnikov projects that the rule of new oprichnina will be harsh and even bloody, because one of its goals is the redistribution of wealth. But the corrupt elite, which the neo-oprichnina will destroy, is not the only target of Kalashnikov's dreams of large-scale ("at least twenty years long") terror. Ordinary people – some "30 million," a figure that may be an allusion to the number of Slavs Hitler also planned to exterminate – are its target:

> The livestock's ethic is in shambles; all they want is breaks and time off. All the time. […] The riff-raff is useless, as engineers or even laborers. […] If they get the right to vote, that herd will elect anyone who promises an easy life. At whatever price. […] And these degenerates are legion, 30 million at least.[67]

Kalashnikov's view of his fellow citizens is similar to that of the authors of *Project Russia*: "The masses thrash around like scared beasts in a fire. Suffocating in the smoke, they can see no way out of the burning forest. And no free elections have ever automatically solved the problem of setting new goals."[68]

Other members of the Izborsky Club, and Putin's apparatchiks too, are of the same opinion about their compatriots and especially about those who protest against Putinism. This is how Valery Fyodorov, head of the VTsIOM polling agency, speaks of his fellow Russians, saying that people who "get involved in discussions about the fate of Russia without actually being concerned about its fate" are "crap."[69] Fyodorov holds that the "generally about 15%" of Russians who qualify for that soubriquet "are negatively disposed toward the course taken by Vladimir Putin, toward his regime, and in part toward him personally."[70]

The IDC and the Izborsky Club extol the thesis that the oprichnina was an attribute of the tsar's powers because the tsar embodies in himself the abstract multitude. Alexander Eliseev claims that the oprichnina was a network of people fully devoted to the tsar who, "based on the kinship of their souls," did

not consider themselves independent subjects. The oprichniks were, in sum, the tsar's eyes, ears, and counselors on all aspects of social life and "the tsar's thunder" to punish "the rest of society, the *zemshchina*."[71]

Andrey Kobyakov, chair of the IDC's board, praises the oprichnina in particular because "in parallel with the oprichnina and its centralization of power emerged a system of local governance that was a true grassroots democracy. It was strangled by Peter 'the Westernizer.' The new oprichnina should also be based on strong local self-governance."[72]

Taking all this one step further, Izborsky Club adept Egor Kholmogorov, clearly distraught over Russian military failures in Ukraine, eagerly went on record to call Putin "our Souverain" and the Russian state an "autocracy," blamed "the elite" for all difficulties, and appealed for the immediate institution of an oprichnina.[73]

Relying heavily on tsarebozhie dogmas and the spiritual turn in the post-Soviet historiography of the oprichnina, Dugin, Fursov, Averyanov, Eliseev, et al. concur that the oprichnina is the only hope for Russia's national salvation. The capstone of the future Russian society, it is the essence of its social system and a certain means of securing its future.

A Russian "Tradition of Civil Society"

Vyacheslav Manyagin, a journalist and author of several books about Ivan the Terrible, and Mikhail Krivonosov, chair of the Alexandrovo Civic Chamber and a professional athlete, have co-authored a concept of the oprichnina as a Russian "tradition of civil society."[74] According to them, the world's future lies with the "civilization-states": the Western European, the Eurasian, the Chinese, the North American, and the South American (although with no reference to Samuel P. Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations).[75] The emergence of these civilization-states is a positive factor because it will allow the preservation of "the existing socio-economic system without destroying such familiar institutions as ethnos, family, a political power vertical bound to a particular territory, etc." To avoid the prospect of a potentially disastrous technological revolution instigated by the West with the goal of "turning humans into cyborgs," Russia needs to "unite the Eurasian space."[76]

Inspired by Divine Providence, Russia is to become a self-sustainable economic and military power that will serve as a lesson for the rest of humanity. The Western model of civil society is "divisive" and "monstrous," "pushing humanity to its moral, spiritual and physical annihilation," and is therefore inappropriate for the future Eurasian civilization-state. In the Western model, the state and civil society are antagonists. But throughout its history, Russia has been steadily developing its own model of a genuine civil society that ends this antagonism. To support their argument, the co-authors enlist two historical precedents: Ivan the Terrible's *Zemsky sobor*, which harmonized "relations between the state and the people in the interests of the whole population," and Stalin, who undertook a second attempt to create a civil society in the 1930s.

According to Manyagin and Krivonosov, Ivan the Terrible entirely transformed Russia, "mostly peacefully, albeit not without bloodshed," and the oprichnina and local self-governance underpinned those transformations. Ivan subdued the "boyar-oligarchs," enabling Russia to transition from the Middle Ages to modernity – which these authors, unlike the neo-Eurasians, regard as a positive development. Ivan the Terrible was "a true representative of the people" and "the incarnation of the Russians' unity." Through the Zemsky sobor, he combined a "popular monarchy" with an ironclad power vertical and democratic self-governance (*samoupravlenie*). In the sixteenth century, the oprichnina cleansed central Russia from boyar-driven separatism. By "picking through the little people," it opened up social mobility for thousands and showed the boyar-oligarchs their rightful place.[77] Quoting Snychov almost verbatim, Manyagin and Krivonosov imagine the oprichnina as an "instrument in the hands of a surgeon, helping the tsar to operate on Russian society with precision, leaving […] all that is healthy and suitable for the new world."[78]

The idea that *sobornost'* was foundational to Ivan's project and was reflected in the self-governing Zemsky sobor arguably came to Manyagin and Krivonosov via Snychov's writings. They imagine the Zemsky sobor as having consisted of "the people's most trusted representatives who were at the same time trusted representatives of the state," meaning that this institution bore no relation to the Western division of powers. To philosopher Berdyaev, the Zemsky sobor differs from the Western parliaments in its "consensus of estates" (*soslovnost'*), but Manyagin and Krivonosov strike a new note in their far-rightist misinterpretations of Ivan's rule. They claim that he did not unilaterally impose the oprichnina: on the contrary, the Zemsky sobor came up with the idea and gave the tsar the powers to bring it into being. Yet when it comes to historical references to back up this and other claims, Andrey Fursov and the nineteenth-century religious philosopher Lev Tikhomirov are about as far as they can go.

Echoing both Vladimir Sharov and Ivan Snychov, Manyagin and Krivonosov insist that Ivan IV and all Russians, his subjects, perceived Russia as a monastery, where "everyone serves the tsar who is the incarnation of God on Earth," because Russia, the Third Rome, was to "deliver Christ's Truth into the darkness of pagan disbelief." They applaud Ivan for creating "a society based on social justice and uniting the Eurasian lands around Moscow." Contrary to historical facts, they opine that Ivan's reign "doubled Russian territory, increased its population by one-third, and […] supported Russia's progressive development over a century and a half, up to the reforms of Peter the First."[79]

Along with the rest of the Izborsky Club, they dwell on the idea that Ivan IV "offers us a unique experience" to follow. Reiterating that Stalin also created his own version of the oprichnina, Manyagin and Krivonosov maintain that "Ivan the Terrible's state-building" is a model for today's Russia, because the tsar overcame the divide between power and the people. Following his example, the estates will replace classes with their divisive attitudes and "will all work together towards a common super-goal and super-idea that is equally important to all the people."[80]

The new civilization-state will center on the new oprichnina and have a "core (Russia) and two layers – 'the internal' ('the Russian world') and 'external' ('Eurasia')." Using the language of Vladimir Medinsky's programmatic *Foundations of a Cultural Policy* (2014), Manyagin and Krivonosov want Russians to become the state-forming nation of this future society and propose to "dissolve all political parties, including the ruling party [United Russia – D.Kh.], and fashion in Russia an estate-based social structure, which is the best suited to the new civilizational model."[81]

Manyagin and Krivonosov actively participated in the campaign to return Ivan the Terrible's monument to Alexandrovo.[82] But that was not enough: they also recommended establishing an Alexandrovo Ivan IV Vasilievich the Terrible Institute for the Development of Russian Governance.

The Oprichnina as a Way of Life

The re-introduction of the oprichnina should not be regarded as a mere mind game played by some far-right eccentrics. There are Russians who actually choose to live according to oprichnina principles. The neo-oprichnina is, in fact, a grassroots movement that is either based on tsarebozhie or closely resemble this creed.

In his study of the tsarebozhie movement's early stages, Verkhovsky notes that the neo-oprichniks and national monarchists view dictatorship as the only way to establish an autocratic monarchy in Russia, which they imagine as a Mussolini-style corporate fascist state ruled by a Russian Orthodox tsar.[83] The promotion of racial crimes and hate crimes has characterized their publications since the very outset, in the early 1990s. The notion of "sacral terror" against the enemies of the Russian people and of the Russian Orthodox Church is suggestive of similarities between "Russian political Orthodoxy," as it is sometimes called, and terrorist states like ISIS. Indeed, several of those movements, communities, and networks conceptualize themselves as a military order.

Prominent among neo-oprichnik groups is the Union of the Orthodox Banner-Bearers, created in 1992 by Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich. Simonovich-Nikshich is firm in the opinion that the oprichnina's tortures and summary executions did a service to the tsar's enemies, by granting them atonement, reconciling them with God, and opening for them a path to redemption in Heaven:

> [H]e seemed to be addressing his enemies: "Come to us and repent, and we will put you at rest! We will, of course, execute you, and your death will be dire, because sufferings in life from the punishing hand of the tsar are purification and redemption. Before death, you will be confessed by a priest, and you – forgiven, your sins remitted – will go straight to heaven."[84]

The belief that the tsar's wrath is also the wrath of God and that the tsar's punishment is a way of avoiding eternal damnation is prevalent among the

supporters of tsarebozhie and the followers of neo-oprichnik movement. Both Patriarch Alexy and Patriarch Kirill have publicly honored Simonovich-Nikshich, and the Church did not object to the Union's burning of "blasphemous" books (including Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* and *Sugar Kremlin*, and *The Gospel of Vladimir* written by the notorious Putinist and TV anchor Vladimir Solovyov), as well as a poster of *Matilda* (a 2017 film by Alexey Uchitel that tells of Nicholas II's love affair with Mathilde Kshesinskaya, a ballet dancer) and the film director's photo.

Several Russian communities follow the rites of the oprichnina. One such is The Oprichnina Brotherhood in the Name of the Blessed Tsar Ioann the Terrible, which is led by Andrey Shchedrin (pen name, Nikolay Kozlov) and is located near the town of Lyubim in the village of Kashcheevo in Yaroslavl region. Kozlov, publisher of the newspaper *Oprichny listok*, has been a radical monarchist since the 1980s.[85] His views revolve around the purported Jewish conspiracy, and Snychov's conviction that Ivan the Terrible's terror was the only remedy against the Jews, the Judaizer heresies, and their attempts to pervert Russia's "holy being." Kozlov believes that Ivan should be canonized,[86] praises Stalin, whom he calls "the Grand Inquisitor of the present day," and proposes that he be canonized too, because Stalin wanted to "restore the sovereign two-headed eagles in place of the bloodstained Judaic stars on the Kremlin's spires,"[87] implying that the Bolshevik revolution was a Jewish conspiracy. Alexander Dvorkin, who has written extensively on the Brotherhood, emphasizes that torture occupies a great deal of space in Kozlov's writings and is justified there because the perpetrator redeems his victims and saves their souls by dispatching them directly to heaven.[88] (These ideas are reminiscent of Yurganov's thesis of the allegedly religious motives for Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina.) The Oprichnina Brotherhood encompasses several families and owns homes in the village of Kashcheevo. Its children do not go to school and are often illiterate. The men perform manual labor and travel, selling their propaganda across the country. Novices pass through an initiation ceremony. Community life is organized by Kozlov, who calls himself "tsar-hegemon" and "*barin*" ("master"), while all the rest are *kholopy*. The kholops have no names; their *barin* calls them by nicknames and keeps them hard at work for him. He takes confessions in his Oprichnina Church, and rewards and punishes his "children" accordingly. Denunciations of kholop by kholop are routine, and physical punishment is common. According to Dvorkin, Kozlov's oprichniks – his security detail – control the community by force and by fear of the Antichrist, the Apocalypse, and so forth, and have been known to attack local police officers. Dvorkin is of the opinion that Kozlov wants to become a new Russian tsar and points out that although Kozlov imputes all kind of sins to the Russian Orthodox Church and its hierarchy, his influence had spread among religious Russians outside his community.[89]

Another neo-oprichnina group, The Brotherhood of the Holy and Reverend Iosif Volotsky, is led by Anatoly Makeev, who sees his mission in combating

Judaizer heresies (as Ivan did in his day). He labels the purveyors of those heresies "the missionaries of the Antichrist," which naturally means that no measures taken against them are off limits.[90] A certain Father Pyotr rules yet another large tsarebozhie sect, in the city of Vladimir's Bogolubovo Convent.[91] Despite complaints of corporal punishment and child abuse, this sect had yet to be dissolved by the authorities at the time of writing.

Probably the most telling example, indicative not only of the spread of the movement but also of its social organization, is the neo-oprichnina sect organized by Schema-Hegumen Sergy, confessor of the Sredneuralsky Convent in Ekaterinburg diocese, who took the convent over after its abbess and several nuns fled. Sergy (1955–), a police academy graduate and former policeman who changed his secular name to Romanov in honor of the assassinated royal family, was sentenced in 1986 to thirteen years in prison for robbery and murder.[92] In 1997, after serving out his term, he took monastic vows from Archbishop Vikenty in the Ekaterinburg diocese, although the Orthodox Church formally prohibits convicted criminals from admission to the monastic life. Sergy was involved in the building of the convent at Ganina Yama (believed by some to be where Nicholas II and his family were buried),[93] which had a population of approximately 300, and of an associate establishment in the village of Novoselova.[94] According to *Novaia Gazeta*, the sect boasted roughly 1000 active members in its various locales. As in other neo-oprichnina communities, physical abuse and intimidation (in this case administered by "oprichniks" – criminals who had served their prison terms with Sergy) were routine. Neophytes, often single women, were pressured to sell their homes and contribute the proceeds to the sect.[95] In accordance with a tsarebozhie claim that passports and the Russian equivalent of a social security number are satanic inventions (a dogma akin to one held by the Old Believers), new members had to burn their documents, rendering them non-persons as far as the state was concerned and therefore entirely dependent on the sect.

Sergy's sect had an extended network, which included several current and former Duma members (for example, Natalya Poklonskaya) as well as heads of Moscow banks and several organized crime kingpins.[96] Sergy maintained close relations with mafia godfathers in the region and beyond, who actively supported his sect. This provides a clear example that tsarebozhie in particular and the Russian monarchist movement in general have no qualms in integrating the criminal underground into their social fabric, mirroring the penetration of the mafia into all spheres of post-Soviet society. It also demonstrates that criminal gangs and neomedieval sects have common features in terms of social organization.

In an open address delivered in July 2020, Sergy asked Putin to let him rule the country for three days, which was all the time he would need "to put everything back in order."[97] In July 2020, he was excommunicated by the Ekaterinburg eparchy. In December 2020, Sergy's Convent was stormed by OMON forces (Russia's feared "black berets") and its property annexed by the

Patriarchy, while Sergy was captured.[98] In January 2023, he was tried for extremism and given a seven-year sentence.

Sergy's real-estate conflicts with the eparchy notwithstanding, his direct approach to Putin seems to have decided his case. This does not, however, change the fact that tsarebozhie enjoys considerable political support, and that its influence continues to grow. As Alexander Soldatov puts it, tsarebozhie is "Russia's secret faith hidden beneath the veil of the Moscow Patriarchy."[99] The yearly procession from Ekaterinburg to Ganina Yama, now a central location of the tsarebozhie cult, burgeoned from a few dozen people in 1992 to 100,000 in 2018.[100] And, as Margaret Comer shows, the city of Ekaterinburg financially and culturally privileges the Romanov memorial over the Memorial of the 12th Kilometer, where thousands were executed during the Stalinist terror, leaving it to be cared for only by the victims' few remaining family members.[101]

The wide-ranging propaganda of terror in Russia may explain the growing popularity of tsarebozhie and the neo-oprichnina movement, despite their endorsement of coercion and physical abuse. Condemning tsarebozhie, Arkady Maler, a member of a theological commission on the Russian Orthodox Church, has stated that "in this context, violence is perceived not as an unpleasant yet compulsory step that is to be taken in extreme cases but as an independent value, consciously fostered and a part of that very ideology."[102]

Two aspects of tsarebozhie – its mobilization-mindedness and its militarism[103] – make this sect, which is thriving in the bosom of Russian Orthodoxy, an important force in nurturing the post-Soviet mobmemory. Some scholars claim that the supporters of tsarebozhie view the "sainted Romanovs" "mainly […] as moral figures – examples for the Russian people today," whose cult helps create "a new morality" that serves the needs of "Christian patriots."[104] In contrast, I consider tsarebozhie an important component of Russian neomedievalism and a vehicle of the neomedieval mobmemory of terror that is spreading through various channels in post-Soviet society. The very fact that thousands already live voluntarily in oprichnina-style communities speaks volumes as to the social appeal of the theories explored above and showcases their actual pragmatism and applicability in Putin's Russia.

Notes

1 François Furet, "Terror," in *The French Revolution in Social and Political Perspective*, ed. Peter Jones (New York: Arnold, 1996), 463.
2 *ibid*., 451.
3 On tsarebozhie, see Chapter 3.
4 Alexander Dugin, "Metafizika oprichniny. Tezisy vystupleniia Aleksandra Dugina v ramkakh 'Novogo Universiteta' (Aleksandrovskaia sloboda, dvorets Ivana Groznogo 26 fevralia 2005)," *Arktogeia*, March 5, 2005. (Available at www.pravaya.ru/leftright/472/2526/?print=1.)
5 Alexander Dugin, "Zaria v sapogakh," *Zavtra*, March 27, 2000. In his brief overview of the new oprichnina in the writings of the Russian far right, Halperin claims that the concept of the new oprichnina emerged not in the 2000s, but in

2010. Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory*, 88. He also holds that Dugin used the concept metaphorically and states that Dugin did not publish his ideas about the oprichnina. *Ibid.*, 87.

6 Dugin, "Metafizika oprichniny."
7 Ilya Kalinin, "Nostal'gicheskaia modernizatsiia: sovetskoe proshloe kak istoricheskii gorizont," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, 2010, 6: 74. As Anton Weiss-Wendt puts it in relation to the Kremlin's propaganda of the Great Patriotic War, "[i]n Putin's Russia, obsession with the past comes in lieu of plans for the future." Weiss-Wendt, *Putin's Russia and the Falsification of History*, 2.
8 Mariëlle Wijermars believes that Dugin's "Zaria v sapogakh" uses the term neo-oprichnina metaphorically. Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia*, 173–74.
9 Dugin, "Zaria v sapogakh."
10 For example: "The symbolism of the broom also has two symbolic levels: it is a symbol of purity and can mean a special caste of differentiated people. […] Here we can recall the hierarchy of the tantric *kaula*, where *pashu* (animals) stand on the lower levels, then there are 'heroes,' then 'gods.' It's a cleansing process." Dugin, "Metafizika oprichniny." See also Dugin, "Zaria v sapogakh."
11 Dugin, "Metafizika oprichniny."
12 Alexander Dugin, *Sotsiologiia russkogo obshchestva: Rossiia mezhdu khaosom i logosom* (Moscow: Academicheskii proekt, 2011), 41, 42, 136, 386, 387.
13 Dugin, "Metafizika oprichniny."
14 *ibid.*
15 Dugin, "Zaria v sapogakh."
16 Dugin, *Sotsiologiia russkogo obshchestva*, 385–386.
17 Alexander Dugin, "Den' rozhdeniia Ivana Groznogo," *Izborskii klub*, August 26, 2016.
18 *ibid.*
19 *ibid.*
20 Dugin, "Zaria v sapogakh."
21 Dugin met Konstantin Malofeyev, known for his reverence for Snychov, in the mid-1990s, and may have become acquainted with the ideas of tsarebozhie through him. They continue to collaborate to this day.
22 Pavel Zarifullin, "Evraziiskaia oprichnina vosstanovit v Rossii sakral'nuiu vlast'" (referenced in Elena Loskutov, *Iunaia politika: Istoriia molodezhnykh politicheskikh organizatsii sovremennoi Rossii* [Moscow: Tsentr Panorama, 2008], 80).
23 Verkhovsky, *Politicheskoe pravoslavie*, 22–23.
24 Averyanov, "Oprichnina – modernizatsiia po-russki," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 197.
25 *ibid.*, 141.
26 *ibid.*, 197.
27 *ibid.*, 147.
28 *ibid.*, 182, 197.
29 *ibid.*, 141
30 *ibid.*, 159.
31 *ibid.*, 197.
32 *ibid.*, 156.
33 Vitaly Averyanov, "Shizo-konservatizm i plutokratiia," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 17.
34 *ibid.*, 18.
35 Averyanov, "Shizo-konservatizm i plutokratiia,"18. The notion of "declarative humanism" comes directly from Soviet ideology, which followed Marx and Lenin in their scorn for "false, bourgeois humanism." Maxim Gorky came up with the infamous term "proletarian humanism" (*Pravda*, May 23, 1934; *Izvestia*, May 23, 1934), and Stalin used it in his speech of May 4, 1935, which was published by *Literaturnaia Gazeta* on July 9, 1935.
36 Averyanov, "Shizo-konservatizm i plutokratiia,"17.

37 Averyanov, "Oprichnina – modernizatsiia po-russki," 189, 187.
38 *ibid*., 186.
39 Outlined in Chapter 3.
40 Averyanov, "Oprichnina – modernizatsiia po-russki," 187.
41 Andrey Fursov, "Oprichnina v russkoi istorii – vospominanie o budushchem ili kto sozdast IV Rim?" in *Novaia oprichnina*, 53. See also Andrey Fursov, "Ivan Groznyi, kak i Stalin – odin iz samykh obolgannykh pravitelei Rossii," *business-gazeta.ru*, July 23, 2017.
42 Fursov, "Oprichnina v russkoi istorii," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 52.
43 *ibid*., 84.
44 *ibid*., 52.
45 Fursov, "Ivan Groznyi, kak i Stalin."
46 Fursov, "Oprichnina v russkoi istorii," 92.
47 *Ibid*., 89.
48 *ibid*., 116.
49 *ibid*., 131–32. "Spetsnaz" is the contemporary Russian abbreviation for "special forces."
50 *ibid*., 138.
51 *ibid*., 118. Fursov is presumably quoting Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Schweik* here. He adds that corrupt oprichniks "should be shot like mad dogs." *ibid*., 116.
52 *ibid*., 72–73.
53 *ibid*., 74.
54 Fursov, "Ivan Groznyi, kak i Stalin."
55 Andrey Fursov, "To, chto ne udalos' Gitleru, segodnia pytayutsia realizovat' anglosaksy," *BiznesOnline*, April 28, 2022.
56 http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5413. Maxim Kalashnikov, "Pis'mo Maksima Kalashnikova prezidentu D. Medvedevu."
57 Anastasiia Kirilenko, "Futuroblogera vyzvali v Kreml'," *Radio Svoboda*, October 9, 2009. www.svoboda.org/a/1847718.html. Kirilenko, "Sovetchika Kremlia proveriat na ekstremizm," *Radio Svoboda*, October 29, 2009. www.svoboda.org/a/1863471.html.
58 Maxim Kalashnikov, "U poslednei cherty? Na poroge novykh 30-kh…," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 37.
59 *ibid*., 47.
60 Maxim Kalashnikov, "Oprichnina – diktatura razvitiia," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 242–43.
61 *ibid*., 243.
62 Kalashnikov, "Oprichnina – diktatura razvitiia," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 234.
63 Kalashnikov, "U poslednei cherty?" in *Novaia oprichnina*, 48.
64 *ibid*., 39; Kalashnikov, "Oprichnina – diktatura razvitiia," 248.
65 Kalashnikov, "U poslednei cherty?" 46.
66 Anastasiia Kirilenko, "Medvedevu predlozhat opyt Gitlera i Berii," *Radio Svoboda*, September 17, 2009.
67 Kalashnikov, "U poslednei cherty?" 40-41.
68 *ibid*., 27.
69 "Na glavu VTsIOMa podali v sud za rassuzhdeniia na 'Dozhde'," *RBK*, July 25, 2017. https://rus.azattyq.org/a/28636603.html.
70 *ibid*.
71 Alexander Eliseev, "Sub'ekt novoi oprichniny," *Izborskii klub*, February 19, 2010.
72 Andrey Kobyakov, Vladimir Khomyakov, Egor Kholmogorov, Alexander Eliseev, Igor Boshchenko, Sergey Alferov et al. "Diskussiia vokrug oprichnoi idei: Gor'koe lekarstvo," in *Novaia oprichnina*, 260–62.
73 https://telegram.me/s/holmogortalks?before=24107.
74 Vyacheslav Manyagin and Mikhail Krivonosov, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo: russkaia model' Ekspertnyi doklad Mikhaila Krivonosova i Viacheslava Maniagina Izborskomu klubu," *Izborskii klub*, August 10, 2018. Manyagin has authored several

publications about Ivan IV: *Apologiia groznogo tsaria. Kriticheskii obzor literatury o Tsare Ioanne Vasil'eviche Groznom i tsare Borise* (Moscow: Russkii vestnik, 2002); *Pravda groznogo tsaria* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006); and *Apologiia groznogo tsaria* (Moscow: Rodnaia strana, 2018). In 2018, another attempt to prove that Russia has no need for liberal democracy was made by Oleg Kharkhordin in his *Republicanism in Russia: Community Before and After Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

75 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
76 Manyagin and Krivonosov, "Grazhdanskoe obshchestvo: russkaia model."
77 *ibid*.
78 *ibid*.
79 *ibid*.
80 *ibid*.
81 *ibid*.
82 "Spokoinoi nochi, berdyshi."
83 For example, Alexander Eliseev, "Monarkho-fashizm," *Tsarskii Oprichnik*, 2001, 23. http://oprichnina.chat.ru/opr10/10_3.html. See also Eliseev, "Orden sviatorusskih bogatyrei." http://oprichnina.chat.ru/opr12/12_5.html.
84 Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich, "Strasti po Ioannu," *Zavtra*, July 15, 2003. https://zavtra.ru/blogs/2003-07-1551.
85 On Kozlov and his sect, see Alexander Dvorkin, "Doklad 'Psevdopravoslavnaia sekta Oprichnoe bratstvo' i ee rukovoditel' N. Kozlov (A.A. Shchedrin)," *Tsentr religiovedcheskikh issledovanii vo imia sviashchennomuchenika Irineia Lionskogo*, February 25, 2004. https://iriney.ru/iskazhenie-pravoslaviya-i-okolopravoslavnyie-sektyi/oprichnoe-bratstvo/psevdopravoslavnaya-sekta-%C2%ABoprichnoe-bratstvo%C2%BB-i-ee-rukovoditel-n.-kozlov-(a.a.-shhedrin).html.
86 *ibid*.
87 *ibid*.
88 *ibid*.
89 *ibid*.
90 On this sect, see Vyacheslav Likhachev, *Politicheskii antisemitizm v sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: Tsentr "Sova," 2003).
91 Alexander Soldatov, "Vosstanie 'sekty tsarebozhnikov,' otets Sergii (v miru Nikolai Romanov) i Poklonskaia: Pochemu oni tak vliiatel'nye, khot' i razdrazhaiut RPTs," *Novaia gazeta*, August 15, 2017.
92 Ol'ga Filimonova, "Reiderskii zakhvat, monakh s kriminal'nym proshlym i pokoinyi vor v zakone: chto sviazyvaet prokurora Kryma s Uralom," *Kompromat*, March 17, 2017.
93 On the burial of the tsar's family, see Helen Rappaport, *The Last Days of the Romanovs: Tragedy at Ekaterinburg* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 203–205.
94 Soldatov, "Vosstanie 'sekty tsarebozhnikov.'"
95 Filimonova, "Reiderskii zakhvat."
96 Soldatov, "Vosstanie 'sekty tsarebozhnikov.'"
97 "Otets Sergii potreboval ot Putina otdat' emu vlast'. Obeshchaet navesti poriadok za tri dnia," *ura.ru*, July 12 2020. See also www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/extremism/counter-extremism/2020/07/d42683/.
98 https://66.ru/news/society/240006/; https://lenta.ru/brief/2020/12/29/sergy/.
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5

THE OPRICHNINA AND SERFDOM IN POPULAR CULTURE AND PUBLIC DEBATES

In this chapter, I analyze the influence exercised by political neomedievalism on Russian cultural production, a subject that has not been considered in previous studies of violence in post-Soviet popular culture.[1] I argue that the Kremlin's state-sponsored neomedieval memory politics has conditioned the distinct nature of post-Soviet representations of violence and the state terror perpetrated by the *oprichnina*. The neomedieval aspects of post-Soviet popular culture's obsession with rule by terror has created a unique context for the formation of the post-Soviet mobmemory.

A widely mooted and divisive issue, the oprichnina has become the subject of intense literary controversy that has triggered far-reaching debates in the Russian media and opened up a whole gamut of political reactions.[2] In a convincing illustration of its centrality in post-Soviet cultural and political life, this controversy features in several novels – *The Third Empire: Russia As It Ought to Be* (2006) by Mikhail Yuriev, *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006) by Vladimir Sorokin, *The Slynx* (2000) by Tatyana Tolstaya, *Day of the High Achiever* (2008) by Maxim Kononenko, and *The Case of the Greedy Barbarian* by Kholm van Zaichik (actually Vyacheslav Rybakov and Igor Alimov) (2004). This controversy, which has, in addition, involved Pyotr Krasnov's 1922 novel *Behind the Thistle* and Alexander Prokhanov's *A Symphony of the Fifth Empire* (2007), was also reflected in several films, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

When these post-Soviet novels were written, neomedieval memory politics was still under construction, the ultra-nationalist movements and sects to which the Kremlin would outsource many of its political initiatives in the 2010s were in their formative stages, and historians were just discovering the "spiritual side" of terror. The turbulent disputes sparked by these works of fiction were primarily animated not by a subtle feedback loop between life and art[3] but by direct links between fiction and politics. The intertextual dialogue among those

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works provoked a polarization of public opinion that accompanied mobmemory formation. Yet while popular culture has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in reshaping the memory of the oprichnina into mobmemory, it is also an arena where neomedievalism and mobmemory may be confronted. The analysis of this intertextual controversy helps to unpack an important device of mobmemory formation, namely, the machinery of celebrity culture. I therefore do not analyze those works primarily as literary texts but instead mainly concentrate on their contribution to the debates on neomedieval memory politics.

The Oprichnina in *The Third Empire*

In 2006, Mikhail Yuriev, the author of the political pamphlet *Fortress Russia*, published a utopian novel *The Third Empire: Russia As It Ought to Be* (covered in some detail in the Preface). *The Third Empire* made quite a stir in Russian public life in the 2000s but managed to evade academic notice.[4] Taking the form of a history textbook authored by a Latin American historian in 2054, it tells of a Third Russian Empire built by Vladimir the Restorer and his successors on the traditions of "the great Eurasian Empires of the past – Byzantium and the Roman Empire, the Russian Empire under the Tsars, and the Soviet Empire."[5] Yuriev praises Stalin, whom he calls "Yosef the Great," as the founder of Russia's glory, credits him with the reconstruction of Russia's unassailable military power, and applauds him for conquering new lands, wiping out the useless elites and "internal enemies of Russia" during the Purges, and deporting entire peoples during and after World War II. Lenin, in contrast, is called "Vladimir Judas" for his betrayal of Russian nationalism and for having destroyed the Russian Empire.[6] In Yuriev's utopia, Russia conquers Europe and the United States. A parade on Red Square that Yuriev compares to the Victory Parade of 1945 celebrates Russia's total military triumph and prominently features among its prisoners of war not only generals but also

> [R]epresentatives of all the elites of the United States: President Bush III and former presidents Bill Clinton, Bush Junior, and Hillary Clinton; current and former members of the cabinet, the House, and the Senate; bankers and industrialists; newspaper commentators and television anchors; famous attorneys and top models; pop singers and Hollywood actresses. All of them passed through Red Square in shackles and with a nameplate around their necks […] to show that Russia had fought with and overpowered not the American army but American civilization.[7]

This total war against the West had been waged to delay the Apocalypse. Emperor Gavriil, Yuriev's main protagonist, had taken up arms against the West mainly because he was looking for "traces of the West's real connections with the Devil whom he, like the medieval rulers of the past, considers his personal enemy."[8]

The call for the genocide of entire neighboring nations is one of many neo-fascist features of this novel. Under the Third Russian Empire, certain nations (the Germans, for instance) are allowed to survive and are even granted some rights. Others – the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine – are to be annihilated by Russian troops that "were ordered to destroy the maximum of people, buildings, and infrastructure."[9] All foreign countries are Russia's primordial enemies, "something absolutely alien and hostile."[10]

The writings and verbal statements of far-right conservatives from the Izborsky Club are sometimes considered blueprints for Russian military aggression.[11] Among them, Yuriev's utopia is especially precise in predicting Russia's strategy of hybrid war and its twenty-first-century military campaigns, including the war against Ukraine.

Written to popularize and promote the neo-Eurasian doctrine, Yuriev's utopia calls Russians the "core" nation. Among the Third Empire's population, "the number of ethnic Russians is growing while the number of other people is declining and will continue to decline."[12] Only Russians have a right to choose where to live and their occupation, but peoples conquered by the Third Empire do not.[13]

It is not just a matter of nationhood, though. Yuriev's Russia is an empire and a whole civilization unto itself. (Yuriev's ideal world is divided into five of those empires-cum-civilizations.) Russia, which has subjugated two entire continents, is isolated from the rest of the world both culturally and economically, and lives under strict dictatorship and censorship. The four foundational "sources" essential to the Third Empire's worldview are "the ancient, pre-ethnic tradition of sensing that members of other tribes are absolutely alien," "the medieval tradition of religious isolation from the outer world," "the socialist tradition of considering the rest of the world [...] underdeveloped," and "the latest tradition of alienated perception of the outside world as a priori Russophobe, which gave rise to the modern attitude of Russians regarding the outside world as absolutely alien and hostile, but with a neutral emotional assessment, without any malice, as a natural element."[14]

So what, one wonders, does Russia bring the conquered Europe and the USA? The tradition that makes Yuriev most proud of Russian civilization is the obligatory potlach-style meal (*bratchina*) that ultimately ends up in a brawl "but without anger." To him, this is the social glue (*skrepa*) of Russian society and the best reflection of the Russian national character.[15] However, these regular brawls are insufficient: fistfights between entire neighboring communities are also vital to what Yuriev sees as the innermost values of Russian civilization.[16]

From the viewpoint of mobmemory formation, the most interesting aspect of *The Third Empire* is that in it, Yuriev promotes the neo-Eurasian social project that he so wholeheartedly supports. In the novel, the Russian Constitution "differs from the rest of the world" because of the country's unusual social organization: Russia is a society of estates, or orders.[17] Yuriev specifies that Russian estates are not analogous to feudal estates and also differ from Marx's

classes because their place in the social hierarchy is independent of wealth and capital. The only estate that possesses political power is that of the oprichniks – the *Übermenschen* who have the exclusive right to elect government officials and even the emperor.[18] Only they can serve in the state administration, army, and police force. The oprichnina also has a social purpose, governing this society by "separating the sheep from the goats, warriors from ordinary folks, hence converting the potential enemies of the regime into its loyal servants."[19] Two other estates – the clergy and the third estate – have no political rights at all. And in this multi-confessional Empire, the clergy estate consists only of Orthodox priests: the other confessions fall by default into the third estate, which comprises "businessmen, workers, scientists, writers, artists, engineers, etc." and pays all the taxes, while the oprichniks and the Orthodox clergy are exempt from taxation.[20]

There is no law or custom in place to protect the third estate (the *zemstvo*) from the oprichniks or the almighty emperor. Yuriev is under no illusion that the third estate looks on the oprichniks and the regime in general with fear and an inhibited hostility, and he does not deny that a referendum would show no support for the country's oppressive constitution. This is why only the oprichniks can participate in political decisions, which, according to Yuriev, is a substantial advantage of the Third Empire's constitution over any variety of democracy.[21]

The state provides everything for the oprichniks who, like the Soviet apparatchiks, have no reason to "worry about money" or any other material aspect of life. Yuriev's oprichniks, the latter-day successors to those of Ivan the Terrible, are faithful only to their master, the emperor, and function as a secret police that reports directly to him. Living up to their historical legacy, they rule Russia by unrestrained terror, drowning the occasional insurrection "in blood."[22] Part of the oprichniks' code of honor is the medieval vendetta, which reinforces their control by instilling even more fear into the masses: they always avenge the death of one of their own.

Although Yuriev states that anyone, man or woman, can become an oprichnik provided that he or she follows the correct procedure, he is emphatic that the Third Empire is a caste society, and, like Dugin, he considers it the best form of social organization.[23] The oprichniks and the rest of the population are two "different species, even if they look similar and can cross-breed."[24] Caste ideology is an essential part of the oprichniks' training, and caste attitudes toward the third estate and foreigners create the essence of a Russian society of estates.

Yuriev describes his oprichniks living a life of "killings, adultery, fornication, and debauchery," but explains that neither the Russian Orthodox Church nor its individual priests ever condemn these blatant violations of the Ten Commandments.[25] The oprichniks are "a God-appointed security patrol, and when everything around begins to collapse, that will be what they have always anticipated and in which they see the sense of their being."[26] This is very close to *tsarebozhie* doctrine and its understanding of the oprichnina as Ivan IV's

"heavenly army" that will wage "the decisive eschatological battle of the Apocalypse."[27] This expectation of the end of times helps shape the oprichniks' unique place in Yuriev's social hierarchy. Influenced, like Dugin, by Celtic mysticism, he has his oprichniks believe that their destiny is to perish in the last massive war of the gods. His view of the oprichniks as "heirs of the Vikings," which is similar to Dugin's, brings to mind the bronze monument to Vladimir the Viking prince that was erected on Red Square in 2016.[28] Finally, in Yuriev's utopia, as in Sharov's historical writings, the oprichniks form a "brotherhood." They embody the best part of the Russian nation and "the deep archetypes of the Russian consciousness."[29] But his oprichniks are also endowed with some extraordinary physical abilities, including that of being able to stop their hearts and die if captured.

Yuriev places the oprichnina at the center of his utopia but feels compelled to explain that his new oprichniks are far better than Ivan the Terrible's and acknowledges that Ivan the Terrible's oprichniks have left some awful memories. His oprichniks, therefore, adopt an alternative mythology: they are not perpetrators but "shepherds of the people," and their slogan is "To Shepherd and Defend." Nevertheless, Yuriev replicates for them the functions – and the power symbolics of dog heads and brooms – of the medieval oprichnina.

His attempts to dissociate his oprichniks from their predecessors indicate that back in the mid-2000s, when Yuriev was writing his novel, tsarebozhie and Ivan IV had not yet acquired their current prominence in post-Soviet society, and the state propaganda of medieval terror had yet to take root. That condemnation of the oprichnina persisted until the mid-2000s, when a more positive attitude toward it began to proliferate in the religious and political discourse, and spread to the broader public. Given that the main purpose of Yuriev's 2006 novel was to promote and popularize the neo-Eurasian social project, he still needed, at this early stage in the alteration of the historical memory of the oprichnina, to distance his oprichniks from the historical perpetrators.

The neo-Eurasian movement actively promotes Yuriev's novel, emphasizing specifically its social aspects. The internet portal Odnako, which is run by neo-Eurasianist Mikhail Leontiev, highlights the caste society's significance in Yuriev's utopia. The excerpts from *The Third Empire* that were published on Odnako to reach out to a broader audience deal exclusively with the oprichnina and the society of estates. Titled "The Third Empire: Its Estate Structure," it carries an eloquent subtitle: "The Notion of the Socio-Political Organization of Future Russia: The Right to Power Belongs Exclusively to the Warriors, Together with the Duty to Defend the Motherland and to Die for It."[30]

The Third Empire… Behind the Thistle

The Third Empire was clearly influenced by Dugin and Snychov but has one more remote and unacknowledged yet very important ideological precursor: Pyotr Krasnov. Neither Snychov nor Yuriev explicitly references Krasnov's 1922

novel *Behind the Thistle* in their writings, but it is highly unlikely that they were unfamiliar with this showpiece of Russian nationalism.[31] Although his novel was not published in Russia until 2000, Krasnov had been a cult figure for Russian nationalists even during the Soviet period, a legend in their historical pantheon, and a symbol of the White Guard movement, which most of them admired. One possible explanation why Snychov, who was well familiar with other Russian émigré thought, did not mention him could be Ataman Krasnov's involvement with the Nazis.[32] Despite his own neo-fascist views and the many parallels between his and Krasnov's works, Snychov was too greatly taken by the Stalinist myth of the Great Patriotic War, which he viewed as a major historical proof of Russia's messianic calling, to publicly associate himself with a Nazi collaborator.

Krasnov's absence from Yuriev's references could be similarly explained. In the mid-2000s, when the war myth became a centerpiece of Putin's memory politics, the Nazi collaborator Krasnov would surely not have been an appropriate precursor for someone who, like Yuriev, was constantly attempting to influence the Kremlin's politics. But Dugin, Yuriev's friend, and writer Eduard Limonov, Dugin's former intimate and co-organizer of the National-Bolshevik Party, openly cite Krasnov among their sources of inspiration, perhaps not least because their infatuation with fascism can be neither concealed nor denied.[33]

Krasnov's popularity grew steadily among Russian nationalists in the 2000s and 2010s.[34] A four-meter-high monument to him was erected in the Rostov region in 2006 under the patronage of Don Cossack atamans. In 2016, the Cossack atamans initiated the active rehabilitation of Krasnov, who had been convicted as a Nazi collaborator in 1947.[35] In 2020, Dmitry Kiselyov, a news anchor and so-called "voice of the Kremlin," used his state-sponsored *News of the Week* to lobby for several White generals, including Krasnov, to be honored with monuments.[36]

Despite differences in their plots, Yuriev's and Krasnov's utopias are at one in their vision of the Russian medieval future and its social structure. *Behind the Thistle* is set at the end of the twentieth century. The Red Army has destroyed itself, together with millions of civilians, in an unsuccessful chemical attack against Europe. The ecological disaster and plague that followed has left Russia surrounded by a giant wall of thistles, which has separated it from the rest of the world for decades. Unlike socialism-riddled Europe – a liberal, democratic Europe is Krasnov's enemy number one and, according to him, Russia's primordial enemy as well – Russia has rebuilt its civilization in accordance with the pre-Petrine medieval order and now is ready for new conquests. Krasnov's geopolitical ambitions are the same as those of the present-day Russian far right: to reconstruct the Russian Empire. Europe, which has long been "stealing lands from Russia," should give them back and would in exchange be allowed to join "the greater Christianity and the great Russian culture." The conquest of Europe by Russia would be, to the same extent as the conquest of both Europe and the USA in Yuriev's novel, a gift for the European nations:

> [Europe] stole the property of the Russian crown, as a thief steals property during a fire. And what was stolen must be returned. The needfulness of those pieces to the Russian people is less than the Europeans' need to be initiated into the great Christian faith, into Russian culture.[37]

The reader learns that Krasnov's Russia also plans to conquer Latvia, parts of Poland, Bessarabia, Finland, parts of China, and Mongolia.[38] Krasnov's imperial vision, like that of Snychov, Yuriev, Dugin, and their ilk, is based on the messianic role of the Russian nation.

Krasnov, whom Dugin categorizes as a Russian patriot of a Eurasian bent, is much closer to the neo-Eurasian doctrines than to its Eurasian émigré counterpart.[39] Krasnov scorns his contemporaries, the Eurasian émigré thinkers, for mixing "communist and Slavophile ideas," because they harbored no dreams of Russia's world dominance and openly disapproved of Russian chauvinism.[40] Another major difference between Krasnov and the neo-Eurasians, on the one hand, and the Russian émigré thinkers, on the other, is the latter's total rejection of slavery.

Krasnov's borderline-grotesque prose, glutted as it is with Russian folk motifs and folk expressions, glorifies autocracy and the society of estates.[41] The peasants call the nobles *barin* (master), and are "brought up in respect for labor and docility," and "with love in their hearts."[42] Their utterances to their barins employ the greetings traditionally used by Russian serfs to address their masters.[43] Peasants pay with their labor for the agricultural equipment and livestock provided by the tsar and boyars.

Krasnov paints a graphic picture of "re-education," in which "drunkards" and "the lumpenproletariat" are confined to camps where they are refashioned into hardworking peasants, taking a cue from ancient Rus, which "enslaved worthless drunkards and forced them to work as only the Russian peasant knows how to work – from dawn to dawn!"[44] In this society, in contrast to what Krasnov calls "the rotten European democracies," transients and the other dregs of society are no more, and idle hands are the greatest shame.[45] A society based on slave labor is central to Krasnov's social thinking. The slaves tasked with the hardest physical work are "well treated" and have prospects of social mobility if they are "talented and hardworking." However, he seems to be more sympathetic toward the Russian peasant than Dugin, Yuriev, or the ideologists of the Institute for Dynamic Conservatism (IDC) are toward the present-day Russian lower class. At least, unlike the IDC's Maxim Kalashnikov, he does not propose to exterminate some "30 million" of them.

State terror is the social cement that holds Krasnov's utopia together, much as it does in Yuriev's. In *Behind the Thistle*, the military supervises all aspects of society.[46] Peasants and workers toil under its direct control, and those who disobey orders are subjected to severe corporal punishment (for example, tongue mutilation). The fear of physical punishment keeps the peasants at work even under the light of the moon.[47]

One's place in the social hierarchy is expressed in home decor, for, even though everyone lives a life of plenty in Krasnov's utopia, domestic luxury is reserved for the military estate.[48] Yet even the military masters of this society cannot possess any property – everything belongs to the state and is provided by it, to prevent corruption (another feature of Yuriev's utopia too). Using a direct analogy with Ivan the Terrible's rule and its historical terminology, Krasnov describes the nobility as "boyars of the inner circle" (*blizhnie boyare*). Like Yuriev's oprichniks, they report directly to the tsar about the situation in the country. The *rynda*, the tsar's bodyguard, is another medieval term alluding to the pre-Petrine tsardom. According to Krasnov, ryndas embody the tsar's power to execute his subjects as he sees fit, for all that the death penalty does not exist in his Russia.[49] In addition to the military, the police are "the true protector of the wretched" and a guarantor of social order.[50] There is also a city watch, which monitors the citizens' political conduct.

A comparison of Krasnov's and Yuriev's utopias does, however, highlight the contrast in popular attitudes toward the oprichnina in early twentieth-century and post-Soviet Russia. The absence of "oprichnina" and "oprichniks" from Krasnov's novel indicates the continuing domination of a highly negative memory of the oprichnina in Russian culture and attests to the huge boost it enjoyed under Putin.

Krasnov's novel also presages some tsarebozhie postulates. The restoration of pre-Petrine traditions in Krasnov's utopia has brought back traditional Russian medieval costumes and customs, complemented by a total reliance – to the same extent as in Snychov's writings – on the *Domostroy* in social and family life and in education.[51] Like Snychov, Krasnov considers the *Domostroy* an ideal blueprint for social organization. This is, at last, "a Russia for Russians." An extended premodern family is central to his imagined Russian society, and house servants are considered part of that extended family. In this patriarchal paradise, women and children do not partake in the feasts with the father's guests, and if present at all, are to remain silent. Education in Krasnov's utopia is gender-specific: women learn only skills relevant to childrearing and housekeeping.[52] Although Dyatlov, a socialist and *Behind the Thistle*'s main antagonist, observes this new Russia with scorn, saying that "you have fallen into the Middle Ages," the novel treats this return to Russia's medieval roots as the country's most significant achievement.[53]

The fixation on the sacred figure of the tsar is another feature that connects Krasnov, Snychov, and Yuriev. In *Behind the Thistle*, a young Russian tsar who is called "an earthly God" rescues a Russian nation almost destroyed by the Bolsheviks. Krasnov describes the rumors spreading among desperate Russians beset by hunger, plague, and death about the advent of a new tsar, "young, handsome, and beautiful as an angel," glossing this as "a fairy tale come true," and "a miracle from God."[54] In Krasnov's preposterous style, the tsar's image is positively ludicrous:

> The regal youth […] was "the vision of a golden dream," summoning one into a tsardom of joy and happiness; he only pardoned and never punished. He was the Tsar, God's Own Anointed, and holy was his name.[55]

Prosperity, astonishing technological advancements, and social peace brought Russia back to life once a new Romanov tsar had ascended the throne. Here, as in Snychov's *Autocracy of the Spirit*, and in Yuriev's *Third Empire*, the autocratic monarchy is not only the best model of governance but the only way that Russians can be governed. In Krasnov's text, Nicholas II, whose cult and canonization played a formative role for tsarebozhie, is consistently called "Holy Emperor" and "Great Martyr."[56] The only criticism of Nicholas II relates to his abdication, which was, according to Krasnov, the cause of all Russia's troubles. Krasnov also spells out a central tsarebozhie dogma, namely that the murder of Nicholas II was a sacrilege and that national repentance for the murder is the only way the country can achieve salvation: "The nation's repentance" (he describes Russians on their knees, beating their heads on the ground in an ecstasy of love for the Orthodox religion and their tsar) and "the miracle of God's benevolence" are Russia's one hope.[57] Only after having atoned for the murder of Nicholas II and his family will it be able to return to a life of peace and plenty.

Nicholas II preoccupies Krasnov far more than does Ivan the Terrible: the murder of the royal family had come only four years prior to his novel's publication. However, the idea that Nicholas II and Ivan IV, Russia's "holy tsars," will be resurrected in the near future is also spelled out in *Behind the Thistle*. During a Church service, the novel's main protagonist, artist Korenev exclaims in elation, "I sense the resurrection of the dead!" – upon which there appears a procession of the ghosts of canonized Russian rulers, salient among whom are the holy martyrs Boris and Gleb and Tsarevich Dmitry in his "blood-stained little shirt."[58] Following the pre-revolutionary Russian nationalist tradition, Krasnov calls the Russians *theophoros* and a messianic nation, a concept that Snychov also used constantly in his writings.[59] The fact that today the tsarebozhniks venerate Krasnov as a Great Martyr provides an additional indication that his ideology, which reflected the cult of Nicholas II among post-Revolutionary Russian émigrés, may also have inspired tsarebozhie, which in turn aids our grasp of the roots of the post-Soviet mobmemory.[60] We see, then, that Yuriev's utopia continues an old tradition of Russian far-right thought, with the characteristic difference of a much deeper contempt toward the underprivileged classes.

Resisting the New Oprichnina in Fiction

In response to Yuriev's utopia, Vladimir Sorokin, probably the most popular post-Soviet writer, published his dystopian novel *Day of the Oprichnik* in 2006.[61] Sorokin describes a New Middle Ages that endures well into Russia's future. Set in 2027, after a period of unrest that readers will readily recognize as a demeaning, pro-Putinist account of Yeltsin's democratic reforms, Russia, a theocratic

monarchy and a society of estates that virtually duplicates the social structure of medieval Rus, is partitioned from the rest of the world by a Great Wall of Russia. There are *stolbovye* (distinguished) boyars, the high bureaucracy, the oprichniks, and the serfs or *smerdy* (a medieval word for peasants).[62] This future Russia is ruled by terror and repressions perpetrated by the latter-day oprichniks.

As in Yuriev's utopia, the oprichnina is at the center of the social structure in *Day of the Oprichnik*, and terror is what holds this society together. The anti-hero, the oprichnik Komiaga, drives a Mercedes with a dog's head and a broom attached to it. An early scene realistically depicts the murder of a family man accused of disloyalty to the ruler and the gang rape of his wife. Relationships between the oprichniks resemble those between members of a criminal gang, an impression that is increasingly underscored by the lavish use of post-Soviet criminal slang intermingled with Russian folk expressions, the oprichniks' cynicism and criminality blending naturally with post-Soviet mores. And, while Russian medieval customs are combined here with advanced Chinese technology, Sorokin mocks the neo-Eurasian medieval dream by exposing its cult of violence and terror. In his sardonic twist, neomedievalism is stripped of its imperial ambitions and, instead of uniting Asia and Europe under its dominance, Russia has become China's economic satellite. The Russian economy survives on oil and gas sales and on the duties, fees, and taxes earned from transporting Chinese goods into Europe.

Contrary to the opinion that Sorokin's book was "a direct response to the publication of Krasnov's novel,"[63] there are better grounds to assert that *Day of the Oprichnik*, which was published after *The Third Empire*, was, rather, an attack on Yuriev's novel. First of all, Yuriev himself was of this opinion, as he stated in an interview:

> Q.: But didn't Sorokin base his famous *Day of the Oprichnik* on your book?
> A.: On our book. And with our consent. He spoke with Mikhail Leontiev, my co-author. We didn't mind, he warned us that it would be satirical. Whatever… Sorokin's oprichniks have nothing to do with mine. But it's even useful that he showed what could happen if it [the oprichnina – D.Kh.] had been done wrong, isn't it?[64]

The information in this posthumously published interview finds confirmation in an account given by Victor Toporov, literary critic and editor-in-chief of Limbus Press, where Yuriev's novel was published:

> Political scientists of the pro-Kremlin clan reproach the writer for borrowings that verge on plagiarism: Sorokin's "oprichnik-Moscow" is based verbatim on Mikhail Yuriev's *Third Empire*, turning the patriotic utopia upside down and transforming it into an anti-patriotic dystopia.Well-known television journalist Mikhail Leontiev, for example, told the author of these lines that this is a matter of deliberate encroachment on someone else's intellectual property, not

> an involuntary coincidence of intentions. Yet Sorokin would certainly have objected to reproaches of that sort, by saying that, being a principled postmodernist, he approaches the classical problem of *inventio*|*imitatio* ("one's own" vs. "someone else's") with a late Renaissance and Baroque indifference. Or, as Mayakovsky said of other people's rhymes, "I swallowed that bird without ever noticing."[65]

The Russian far right – Vitaly Averyanov, for example – had no doubt as to the target of Sorokin's novel, reading it as a challenge to Yuriev's utopia.[66] And as such, the Union of the Orthodox Banner-Bearers viewed *Day of the Oprichnik* (and its "sequel," *Sugar Kremlin*) as a challenge to the rising influence of the far right. The Union proceeded to subject both volumes to public immolation.[67]

Arguments in favor of a close kinship between Yuriev's and Sorokin's novels are not far to seek. One is that oprichniks are as central to Sorokin's novel as they are to Yuriev's utopia, while Krasnov, as has already been pointed out, never mentions them at all. In sum, by confronting the emerging neomedieval memory politics and nascent mobmemory, Sorokin created a cultural and political event on the Russian scene that the parody of a novel from 1922 would never have been able to produce. Yuriev's novel supplies the missing link in the intertextual exchange between Sorokin and Krasnov.

Sorokin provided his own explanation of the initial idea for his novel in an interview. Addressing his compatriots directly, he said that he wanted "to model the dream world of many of our oprichniks, who hold that Russia should be separated from the West."[68] (The need for Russia's isolation from the West is also central to Yuriev's novel where it continues the main idea of his *Fortress Russia*.) Sorokin explained that the subconscious trauma of terror had yet to be processed in Russia, where the oprichnina was being kept alive as a political project.[69] He summarized the message of his novel as follows: "[A]ny person close to power behaves as an invader in his own country." He further develops this idea by saying that the Russian authorities were continuing to behave like oprichniks, this being "the heritage of the oprichnina."[70] Earlier, in an interview with *Izvestia*, Sorokin had stressed that

> Ivan had schizophrenia, and that schizophrenia was embodied in the idea of the oprichnina. […] He divided Russian society and pitted one part against the other, thus engendering a civil war in Russia.[71]

Stylistic and thematic similarities between Sorokin and Krasnov are conspicuous: Sorokin uses a lot of quasi-folkloric expressions typical for Russian nationalists of all times,[72] and he also makes latent allusions to Krasnov's novel in his exploration of Krasnov's technological fantasies.[73] But, once again, Sorokin is, by definition, far more interested in Yuriev's celebration of the oprichnina, which, according to Svetlana Alexievich, "has become our reality."[74]

Alongside Yuriev's utopia, Sorokin's parody may have also sought to pillory Vyacheslav Rybakov and Igor Alimov's *Case of the Werefoxes* (2001) and *Case of the Greedy Barbarian* (2003), which were both attributed to the entirely imaginary Kholm van Zaichik.[75] In their novels, which some critics read as an advocacy of Russian chauvinism, the idyllic state of Ordus has brought together the medieval remnants of the Golden Horde, Russia, and China into a great Eurasian empire. In his celebration of the antimodern and anti-Western, van Zaichik has positioned medieval China at the center of his "Eurasian Symphony," as a social and cultural ideal.[76]

Critics often compare Sorokin's novel with Tatyana Tolstaya's *Slynx* (2000), which also employs neomedieval themes.[77] Published at the very beginning of Putin's rule, *The Slynx* portrays Russian society in the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe that almost totally destroyed Russia and possibly the rest of the world. Backwardness, illiteracy, and violence are central to this post-apocalyptic dystopia. The politics of isolationism, primitive tools, a lack of technology and knowledge, a pseudo-folkloric idiom, and pagan beliefs complete the image of this neomedieval society. The "Russian world" is reduced to a couple of small, desolate communities organized into a society of estates.

Benedikt, the novel's protagonist, was born into a family of Oldeners (*Prezhnye*), who still remember the pre-apocalyptic life, value culture, are literate, and continue their pre-disaster debates, in which the reader recognizes the cultural and political disputes of the late 1990s. The Oldeners form a closed circle that is under constant threat from the authorities, who confiscate books as "contagious" and suppress the memories of the advanced pre-apocalyptic society. Benedikt belongs to the oppressed majority, called Golubchiks ("Dearies"). He does not understand his Oldener mother and considers her friends, debates, and books a silly waste of time.

People genetically modified by the nuclear catastrophe (the Degenerators), form the lowest caste of this society because of their multiple physical and mental defects. The dreaded Saniturions capture those who read books and/or disagree with the authorities (thus committing the sin of Freethinking) and take them to be "treated." Since almost no one returns from that "treatment," society lives in constant fear of the Saniturions, who rule over it.

The little settlement where Benedikt lives is governed by the Great Murza whose power is absolute and lies beyond the reason and grasp of the Golubchiks, who are treated like children, in need of constant supervision and strict guidance in their daily lives. The way the Golubchiks address their Murza resembles the Russian serf's traditional greeting to his *barin*, full of exaggerated exclamations, well-wishes, and salutations.[78] *Murza*, a title of the Mongol hereditary nobility, may also hint at the historical theories that attribute the origins of violence in Russian politics, including the oprichnina and the Stalinist repressions, to centuries of Tatar rule.[79]

The major event – and the message of the novel – is Benedikt's transformation. Once an ordinary Golubchik who dreads the Saniturions and sympathizes with

their victims, he marries the Head Saniturion's daughter and morphs into someone whose job is now the senseless and ruthless murdering of his own kind.[80] The most important similarity between Tolstaya's and Sorokin's novels is that they are focused on the terror, unleashed by the state and conducted by the secret police, that governs a caste society forced into social and economic degradation. The terror that underpins the social structure can effortlessly transform ordinary people into perpetrators.

What distinguishes *Day of the Oprichnik* from *The Slynx* is the former's immersion in contemporary political debates. Sorokin's discourse tackles head-on the glorification of the return to the Middle Ages in the discourse of the Russian far right. His dystopian novel is essentially a position pamphlet that confronts the mobmemory in the early stages of its formation. By contrast, Tolstaya's novel, which was among the first to envision the possibility of a neomedieval trend in Russian politics, lies in the domain of post-apocalyptic speculative fiction.

The Oprichnina's Revenge

Responses to Sorokin's dystopia were quick to appear. In 2007, the year after its publication, Alexander Prokhanov, chair of the Izborsky Club, published an essay titled *A Symphony of the Fifth Empire*. [81] A professional writer, Prokhanov arguably chose the essay genre to distinguish himself from *The Third Empire*, while patently referencing the title of Yuriev's much-acclaimed book and promoting a very similar set of ideas. However, unlike Yuriev, whose title refers to both Moscow as the Third Rome and Hitler's Third Reich, Prokhanov's perspective is predominantly Russocentric. He numbers off five periods of Russian history before arriving at the Fifth Empire of his dreams:

> In its facets, the fifth precious crystal will preserve the reflection of the Novgorod republic, the images of the Moscow tsardom, the daring of the Petrine Empire, and the élan of Stalin's "red" realm, while not spurning the era of liberal quest that was so agonizing for Russia.

Prokhanov, like Yuriev and other far-right writers, considers Russia to be a spiritually superior civilization that is ultimately to conquer the world. But whereas Yuriev employs a pragmatic and rationalizing rhetoric, Prokhanov eagerly hypothesizes that magic and mystical "codes" may be discovered in Russian history and has even gone so far as to consider them a gage of "Russia's victory" over "fascist Ukraine."[82] His main focus in *The Fifth Empire* is to offer his readers a concept of Russian civilization that encompasses all the periods of Russian history in an unproblematic heroic narrative. His goal is to "restore the tattered fabric of Russian history" and bring it back to its original state of "uninterrupted flow, the radiant energy of historical creativity." This difficult task forces him, unlike the neo-Eurasians and many other Izborsky Club

members, to perceive even Peter the Great who, from the far-right viewpoint, marred the Russian medieval idyll by the imposition of Western mores, in a positive light. And, while invoking the oprichnina only indirectly, he praises Ivan the Terrible profusely for his achievements.

The "military aristocracy, the country's elite" is central to Prokhanov's vision of the future Russian society: "The religion of Russian Victory" supplies the confessional energy – the "Symbol of Faith" – of the Fifth Empire's army and, more concretely, Stalin's triumph in 1945 is credited as "a victory for Russian civilization."[83] Prokhanov's veneration of Russia's military glory reads as an affirmation of Yuriev's utopia, while his influences on the far right are easy to trace: his overall literary style resonates in Dugin's writings, and Vitaly Averyanov has called the beginning of the war in Ukraine "the threshold of the Fifth Empire."[84] Prokhanov's 2007 celebration of the illustrious continuity of Russian history reflected well the *Zeitgeist* of the time, in particular the Kremlin's politics of re-Stalinization. It demonstrates how closely post-Soviet fiction is interwoven with memory politics and how deep the far right's engagement in the Kremlin's memory politics can go.

Maxim Kononenko, a blogger and journalist known for his anti-liberal views and author of the internet project Vladimir.Vladimirovich™, a collection of vignettes flattering to Putin, published an anti-utopian novel, *Day of the High Achiever* (*Den' otlichnika*, 2008) whose title plays on the assonance of the Russian words *oprichnik* and *otlichnik*. In addition to the evidence supplied by its title, there is an anecdotal clue that this novel is a response to Sorokin's famous book: an acquaintance allegedly witnessed Kononenko pondering the idea of a riposte while reading Sorokin's book on a plane.[85] In Kononenko's novel, which also uses a neomedieval setting, a Birch Tree (Beryozovaya) Revolution has established a neomedieval order in post-Soviet Russia. That revolution brought victory to the liberal democratic intelligentsia and elevated Human Rights Watch to symbolic status.[86] Russia is now an egalitarian society that has overcome corruption by banning money and prohibiting oil and gas production and the use of electricity. Russia's natural resources are sold to the international corporation Procter and Gamble, which is considered Russia's benefactor. Russia lives in a state of terror imposed by the human-rights defenders ("so is prison everything that lies outside the cells of the human-rights defenders?"[87]) and in quasi-medieval poverty. Horses are the only means of transportation; "comfortable" house trailers are lit by candles and heated by burning birch logs. Freedom of speech is reduced to the obligatory meetings held on the square named for the anti-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, where the democratic journalist Viktor Shenderovich puts on his outmoded concerts.[88] Krasnov's novel, in which horses are considered better than automobiles of any kind, also resonates in Kononenko's parody.

The hierarchy of Kononenko's dystopian society is epitomized by the 140-story Freedom House, where the high bureaucracy occupies floors assigned according to rank. Even Russia's human-rights defenders cannot enter the top story, which

belongs to the Procter and Gamble management. The social structure of this new republic, called "D. Russia" (Democratic Russia), resembles the democracy of Ancient Greece, in that all the Russians are equal, but "Bakhtiyars" (people from the former Soviet republics of Middle Asia) are domestic slaves who do all the hard work:

> Yes, money is a no-go in the free D. Russia – money engenders corruption. But goods! We still have goods! And the higher your status, the more goods you get. If you're a boy – you're entitled to so much, if you're a Bakhtiyar – to so much. […] Have the utilities gone bad? Into the furnace they go! Hardworking Bakhtiyars will bring water. They will also take out the slops.[89]

Kononenko's novel attracted less public and scholarly attention than *Day of the Oprichnik* but is still important, if only for its adamant insistence that no matter which path of development Russia chooses, a society of estates and slavery is its inescapable future.

Another response to Sorokin's novel was a nonfiction history book, *The Everyday Life of Ivan the Terrible's Oprichniks* by Igor Kurukin and Andrey Bulychev (the latter a historian of the oprichnina). This book explicitly mentions Sorokin's postmodern parody as a target of the authors' historical criticism.[90] Their goal is to contrast "ideological accounts influenced by Enlightenment ideas that do not apply to medieval Rus" with the "real life of our compatriots" during that time. While citing historical sources that speak of Ivan the Terrible as a murderous tyrant and of the oprichniks' rampages, Kurukin and Bulychev's bibliography nevertheless also lists Volodikhin, Snychov, and Dugin as reputable historians.

Among the plethora of commercial trash fiction on the Russian Middle Ages, the oprichnina is also glorified in the novel *Vivat Emperor!* by the enormously prolific Roman Zlotnikov, a former Interior Ministry official. One of the books in the *Empire* series, *Vivat Emperor!* describes Terranian University students whose human biology is modified through a series of excruciating experiments reminiscent of initiation rituals. As a result, they emerge as a new caste and even a new species whose goal is to restore the monarchy to Russia. According to Zlotnikov, if the tyrant is smart and talented, "tyranny, that being absolute monarchy, is the best form of governance, for it ensures the flourishing of the state and the happiness of its people."[91] Maxim Kalashnikov (whom the reader will remember as the neo-oprichnina theorist from Chapter 4) acclaimed Zlotnikov's image of a new oprichnina as "the path of Russia's national salvation."[92]

Resisting the New Oprichnina in Post-Soviet Films

Providing another dimension to the oprichnina's centrality in the Russian historical memory, the literary controversy around neomedievalist utopias and dystopias also transitioned into an altercation surrounding the film *Tsar* by

Pavel Lungin (2009), which was itself undoubtedly a reaction to the Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics and the growing influence of the far right.[93] Divided into four parts – "The Tsar's Prayer," "The Tsar's War," "The Tsar's Wrath," and "The Tsar's Amusement" – *Tsar*'s plot is set in 1566 to 1568, during the heyday of the oprichnina and in the midst of the Livonian war. The film's plot revolves around the senseless cruelty of Ivan the Terrible, a repulsive and villainous tsar, who sadistically tortures and kills his innocent subjects. The plot focuses on Filipp Kolychev, Ivan's childhood friend whom he appoints Metropolitan of Moscow. Filipp initially tries to appease the tsar, but seeing the futility of that, refuses to bless him during a church service. Filipp's moral resistence and his murder by Ivan's oprichnik-in-chief Malyuta Skuratov is the film's central episode.

Two stars of the late-Soviet and post-Soviet cinema – Pyotr Mamonov and Oleg Yankovsky – are cast, respectively, as Ivan and Filipp in this film, which was presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. Lungin explains his idea for a movie that realistically depicts the horrors of the oprichnina, by saying that Ivan the Terrible inhibited the natural process of Russia's development, "shattered something, and thwarted the Renaissance."[94] Lungin calls Ivan a symbol of Russia's tradition of state-inflicted violence and pointed to the strange attraction that mass murderers such as Ivan may have for audiences.

Screenwriter Alexey Ivanov worked on the film in collaboration with theologian Alexander Dvorkin. In an interview given to Ekaterinburg's eparchial newspaper (Ekaterinburg being the geographical center of tsarebozhie), Ivanov stated that Ivan the Terrible wanted to be worshipped and obeyed as God by his subjects. His messianic claims were at the root of his conflict with Metropolitan Filipp, a devout believer who could not condone the tsar's blasphemy.[95] In other words, *Tsar* contests the central claim of the mystical turn, denying the sincerity of Ivan's religiosity, and openly takes on tsarebozhie and neo-oprichnina sectarianism. Patriarch Alexy, who resisted tsarebozhie's attempts to canonize Ivan, supported the production and praised the film. Oleg Yankovsky was blessed in the role of Metropolitan Filipp by Alexy himself.

Tsar, to quote Kevin Platt, "debate[s] the relationship between subjects and state and the legacy of despotic authoritarian politics in Russia today" and should be regarded as "a manifesto on contemporary society and politics."[96] The political mobilization and activism against the film by the Russian far right is a prime example of the clashes over the oprichnina at this important juncture of mobmemory formation.

The Union of the Orthodox Banner-Bearers[97] and the Orthodox Brotherhood Union staged a demonstration on Tverskoy Boulevard in central Moscow on November 2, 2009, to protest "the unfair depiction of Tsar Ivan Vasilievich," and burned a poster of the film and a copy of the Ilya Repin painting popularly known as "Ivan the Terrible Killing His Son." Also present at this event were the leaders of the neo-oprichnina movement, historian Igor Froyanov, several highly placed Orthodox priests, and a good number of right-wing journalists, writers, and critics. Vasily Boiko-Veliky wrote a letter to then-president

Medvedev, accusing Lungin of slandering Ivan and committing blasphemy.[98] Vyacheslav Manyagin, a new-oprichnina theorist and author of *The Truth of the Terrible Tsar*, also wrote to Medvedev, requesting that the film be banned for "falsifying Russian history." He applied a formula similar to that which Medvedev had used with his Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests, namely, the prohibition of any criticism of the actions of the Soviet Army during World War II. Manyagin, in his turn, asserted that this negative image of Ivan the Terrible, "founder of the Russian state," would distort Russia's positive image in the West, thus damaging Russia's interests.[99]

A review of *Tsar* in Prokhanov's *Zavtra* accused Lungin of disrespect for the Orthodox religion and declared the script's disregard of boyar plots against Ivan a contradiction of historical truth.[100] In his own foray against the film, Froyanov emphasized that Ivan was "a religious, pious and sincere person, devoted to Christ," and drew a parallel between Ivan and Stalin: "Stalin didn't condemn Ivan's cruelty and did not consider his terror a mistake," although "[a]fter executing someone, Ivan spent days in prayer and repentance. God hampered him in this. […] He should have been yet more decisive."[101] Vitaly Averyanov also weighed in, declaring that Lungin's film had taken Sorokin's side in the dispute over Sorokin's book and insinuating that Sorokin and Lungin "have intimate and sentimental relations with the West and are uniquely at odds with Russia."[102] He also blamed Lungin for being in the pockets of "the contemporary plutocracy," which was afraid of the oprichnina.[103] *Izvestia* also criticized the film for its too obvious allusions to Stalinism: the review compared an episode in it with a 1931 movie newsreel showing the demolition of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow: "Lungin even has the cupola fall from the burning church as it did in the 1931 documentary footage."[104]

Finally, Lungin's apparent support of Sorokin's view of the oprichnina as an orgy of senseless terror triggered a massive response from Russian official circles. The impressive array of television series and movies glorifying Ivan the Terrible and the oprichnina that I covered in Chapter 2 came with financial backing from the Russian government and was given much broader exposure than Lungin's film. And all of them, in various ways, challenged Lungin's and Sorokin's vision of the oprichnina, as well as the liberal historiographical tradition in general.

Not only Ivan's rule and his oprichnina but also his turbulent legacy, which culminated in the Time of Troubles, was the subject of much debate in the 2010s. The troubled succession to the Russian throne caused by his murder of Ivan, his eldest son and namesake, left the Russian tsardom in the hands of his second son, Feodor Ioannovich, a sick man who died childless, thus bringing an end to the Rurikid dynasty. Boris Godunov, the brother of Feodor's wife, Irina, and Malyuta Skuratov's son-in-law, seized the throne after his death.

Vladimir Mirzoev's film *Boris Godunov* (2011), which made a powerful impression on Russian audiences, is based on Alexander Pushkin's drama by

the same name, written in 1825 and staged in 1866. In the play, Tsar Boris, whom Pushkin condemns as "a son by marriage of Malyuta, of a hangman, / Himself in soul a hangman," ordered the murder of Ivan IV's last son, Tsarevich Dmitry, in order to ascend the throne. Driven mad by visions of the slaughtered child, Godunov dies in torment. Pushkin's drama, for all that it was still appearing on playbills in the late Soviet period, had had a moral and artistic impact but had created little political resonance.

In Mirzoev's film, the action is transplanted to contemporary Moscow, where the medieval setting serves as a metaphor for the post-Soviet state. Here the boyars drive Mercedes, Pimen is writing his chronicle of Rus on a MacBook, and the tsar's orders are broadcast over the airwaves. Critics attributed the film's success to the extraordinary sense of authenticity produced by the fusion of medieval allusions and post-Soviet realities. It won audiences over by holding a critical mirror up to the Kremlin and trading on the absurdities of neomedieval memory politics.

By directing public attention toward the oprichnina and a social system that rejects civic and human rights, neomedieval politics mobilizes both supporters and opponents of state terror. Significantly, not only anti-liberal writers (Yuriev, Prokhanov, and Kononenko) but also critics of Putin's authoritarian regime (Sorokin, Lungin, and Mirzoev) employ neomedieval imagery to express their vision of Russia's future. State terror, an inherited social inequality, and personal dependence are consistently at the heart of their imaginary worlds.

Attempts to oppose mobmemory in novels and films brought the oprichnina to the front and center of public attention in the 2000s to 2010s. The more public attention the controversy acquired, the more it resonated with the post-Soviet audience and the more acclimatized public opinion became to the oprichnina. The government's memory politics that backed the promotion of a positive image of the oprichnina turned the machinery of celebrity culture to its advantage. Offering state-sponsored films and TV series that sugarcoat Ivan and the oprichnina as free entertainment on state channels, it benefited from the broad reach already achieved by the public debates.

The efforts of liberal writers and filmmakers notwithstanding, the massive state-supported propaganda campaign in concert with its satellite far-right movements, the mystical turn in historiography, and fundamentalist religious sects were by now presenting the oprichnina as a positive episode in the national memory. By leveraging its visibility in the public sphere, neomedieval memory politics won this debate before moving on to popularize other medieval figures and events that epitomize the same anti-democratic values. By ignoring or twisting historical facts, neomedieval memory politics has in essence substituted the historical memory of the oprichnina with mobmemory. Capitalizing on commodified anti-humanism – the global fascination with violence in popular culture – this memory politics has made medieval terror and a tyrannical society of estates seem appealing and fashionable while presenting it as Russia's contribution to the neomedieval entertainment that has taken the world by storm.

The Post-Soviet Kholops

The celebration of the new oprichnina in all its modalities – the Russian state's memory politics, the ideological constructs of Russian far-right political movements and sects, and the imaginings of post-Soviet writers and filmmakers – presupposes a vision of society based on various forms of unfreedom. Among those features, depictions of slavery and serfdom demonstrate that under the influence of neomedieval memory politics, post-Soviet attitudes to those ultimate forms of subjugation have undergone a significant transformation.[105]

In the Soviet period, denunciations of the horrors of tsarist serfdom (abolished in Russia in 1861) were ubiquitous in school history textbooks. The Soviets also appropriated the unanimous condemnation of serfdom in "great Russian literature," claiming many classical Russian writers as the predecessors of their "revolutionary struggle against tsarism." Yet Soviet propaganda's denunciations of serfdom and slavery were broadcast in a country covered by a net of GULAG labor camps, where millions of inmates were forced to work in inhuman conditions, had no rights, and were starved, abused, and murdered by their jailers.[106] And GULAG slavery was not the only expression of unfreedom in "the society of workers and peasants." Until 1974, the Soviet peasants were denied domestic passports, to prevent them from escaping their collective or state-managed farms and moving to the cities. Required registration (*propiska*) deprived all Soviet citizens of the right to freedom of movement, and the Iron Curtain prevented them from traveling abroad at will.

The Soviets claimed "the absence of antagonistic classes" to be the USSR's major achievement, whereas in fact Soviet society was sharply divided by unequal access to privileges. A constant deficit of foodstuffs and consumer goods made a thriving black market a blatant and unavoidable feature of the Soviet economy that further fostered disparities between social groups. By the late Brezhnev period, when a general disillusionment with the Party's cynical ideology was laying the groundwork for communism's collapse, the concept of social equality had become a running joke. The introduction of a market economy and private property in the early 1990s prompted the "New Russians" to dismiss several socialist principles as mere hypocritical clichés of Soviet propaganda. "Social equality," and "social justice" came to be widely despised not only by the bankers and wealthy magnates who were seeking to prove that social *in*equality was necessary to "a healthy society." The liberal intelligentsia too perceived those notions as unwelcome ghosts of the Soviet past.

Vladimir Tuchkov's story "Lord of the Steppe," written in 1999, documents this shift in post-Soviet attitudes. Imitating the style of classical Russian literature, "Lord of the Steppe" tells the tale of a successful New Russian banker, Dmitry, "a product of great Russian literature."[107] Dmitry decides to reconstruct Russia's medieval society on his estate, building a manor house for himself and artificially dilapidated huts for his "serfs" (*kholopy*). The serfs are hired in exchange for their unconditional obedience to any of his whims and for their labor in the fields. The

barin, as he calls himself, reserves the right to flog them when he chooses and settle their quarrels as he wishes, functioning exactly as Russia's feudal landowners did until 1861. The serfs are allowed to break their contracts only in November, on St. Yury's Day, as had been customary until the late sixteenth century, after which that right had gradually been eliminated.

Raping the women and beating the men with impunity, Dmitry exemplifies a true slave-master. Tuchkov holds that in response the slaves develop a dependency on him, feeling incapable of living their lives, keeping order, and working without him. Finally, they end up respecting him as "their own father." In his analysis of the roots of nostalgia for a patriarchal society and the effects of Russian serfdom on the Russian national character – themes that were much mooted in the early 1990s by post-Soviet intellectuals seeking to explain the failure of Soviet socialism in the USSR – Tuchkov has produced a scathing caricature:

> They started to relate to their master not as an eccentric rich man, but as their own father, strict but just, and incessantly caring for their well-being. Deep in their souls every one of them knew that without their *barin*, they wouldn't have plowed or gone to church, and would have started killing each other.[108]

Hinting at the difficulties of adapting to the post-Soviet realities faced by many in the Communist Party's base at the time and ridiculing the deficiency of the patriarchal Soviet state, Tuchkov concludes that Dmitry's serfs would no longer be able to re-adjust to post-Soviet realities that they would consider "savage and inhumane."[109] Eliot Borenstein proposed a Foucauldian interpretation of the power relations in "Lord of the Steppe":

> Tuchkov gives us New Russians whose obsession with power absolutely requires that other people suffer in its exercise. […] Dmitry in "Lord of the Steppe," as the product of Great Russian Literature, is even more demonic [than Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* – D.Kh.]: he has spent his life surrounded by cultural inputs that demand an empathic response, only to identify with the purveyors of cruelty. Culture is no insurance against savage exploitation…[110]

The concept of neomedievalism complements this interpretation. Dmitry's cruelty and disrespect for those below him on the social scale is his implementation, in a neomedieval "utopia," of the emerging post-Soviet social model propelled later by post-Soviet mobmemory. To make his hero even more cutting edge, Tuchkov deliberately omits any critique of the "hypocritical Soviet morality" that was formative for Dmitry and his kind. In its place, he gives us a realistic depiction of the New Russians who, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, aggressively dismantled all notions of humanism, which they dismissed as a

sanctimonious holdover from the Soviet ideology. Instead of provoking sympathy and compassion, Gogol's poorly educated and socially disadvantaged Akaky Akakievich and Dostoevsky's "poor folk" came to be seen as low-life losers, when the New Russians' nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Russian customs and social mores, and their desire to overcome the sense of being powerless subjects of a totalitarian state and to see themselves as lords and masters, quickly developed a firm hold on the nascent post-Soviet elite after communism's collapse.

Tuchkov, one of the first writers to investigate the positive attitudes toward social inequality exemplified by serfdom in his story, decries those attitudes and especially their attendant anti-humanism. In contrast to the writings of post-Soviet ideologists and the Izborsky Club's monarchists on the new oprichnina, Dmitry and his slave society are intended by Tuchkov to provoke condemnation and revulsion in the reader. The story assumes that serfdom and slavery are still considered the ultimate social evil and should be used to decry social injustice.

"Lord of the Steppe" was no satire on the neo-oprichnina, although it was published at a time when the doctrine of tsarebozhie was taking shape and neo-oprichnik sects were beginning to emerge and enact Tuchkov's plot in their communities. Like Dmitry, all the neo-oprichnina's leaders and the oprichnina theorists discussed in Chapter 4 are educated and literate and were raised on classical Russian literature, a mandatory component of the Soviet secondary-school curriculum. Dmitry therefore represents an early diagnosis of their emerging neomedieval mindset and helps uncover the reasons behind its future success.

The comparison of Tuchkov's sarcastic treatment of the normalization of serfdom in the late 1990s with Klim Shipenko's 2019 comedy movie *Kholop* reveals the profound shift in post-Soviet attitudes toward serfdom and slavery that occurred in only a couple of decades. This astonishing film is set in present-day Moscow and tells the story of Grisha (portrayed by Serbian actor Miloš Biković), the ne'er-do-well son of a post-Soviet tycoon, spoiled by Western ways.[111] Deciding to turn Grisha around, his father hires a filmmaker and crew to recreate a nineteenth-century pre-abolitionist Russian village in a movie studio. One day, after a staged car accident, a drugged Grisha wakes up believing that he has fallen into a time warp. The simple idea behind making a good man of him is to reduce him to a serf, a *kholop*. Back-breaking peasant toil and severe physical punishments for not completing his service to his *barin* transform him into a manly Russian hero who rescues his girl from invaders.

Back in contemporary Moscow, Grisha feels out of place in post-Soviet society; his true home now is a fake neomedieval village. The film ends with Grisha returning to the studio, which is converted into a re-education center for other spoiled brats like him. In this neomedieval universe, he takes on the "socially useful" role of a perpetrator who whips nasty rich kids into moral perfection. As the movie's lead character – the film director who runs the staged neomedieval village – explains to Grisha's father: "We are making something great. Our goal is not only to return your son to you: we are creating a new man."[112] (This is, in fact, the movie's tagline.) The director is portrayed by the

popular actor and screenwriter Ivan Okhlobystin, tsarebozhnik and former priest, who, as the reader may remember, acknowledges Snychov as his teacher. In an interview with the Izborsky Club, Okhlobystin explains how best to purify Russian society of its current corruption:

> I would have introduced the oprichnina, I swear to God. I would have introduced the oprichnina, because it's plain to see that you won't get any of these people's money out of them with a kind word. They have it rotting in their basements, but it could all be used to rebuild factories, could all go to the salaries of the teachers, the doctors, on whom society rests.[113]

The oprichnina is the social remedy that will restore Russian society and end the corruption that, Okhlobystin believes, is alien to Russian culture and had been imposed on it along with Western capitalism and its false values. In his speech on Red Square on September 30, 2022, intended to promote the war in Ukraine, he repeatedly yelled "Goida!," the bloodthirsty medieval battle cry of Ivan the Terrible's oprichniks.[114]

Unlike the fiction and films discussed earlier, *Kholop* did not create an uproar and was almost unanimously well received. One critic called it "a good, and cute genre movie" and "a Russian comedy not to be ashamed of."[115] According to state news agency TASS, it had the highest opening weekend box office receipts of any Russian movie in recent decades. Another source lists it as the second most profitable movie in the history of post-Soviet cinema.[116] Capitalizing on the success of this movie, the sequel *Kholop-2* is slated for release in 2023.

From the consensus that serfdom is a hideous crime, which gave rise to Tuchkov's story and made it work in the late 1990s, post-Soviet society has since drifted into the normalization of slavery and serfdom and the endorsement of social inequality as the way to a sustainable society, thus assuring the triumph of the memory of the perpetrators.

These attitudes to serfdom and slavery are scattered through countless post-Soviet neomedievalist novels. As a rule, the details of Russian medieval life are the focus of the writers' attention, and the dominance of the Orthodox religion over everyday life is central to the plot. However, contrary to the works by Sorokin, Lungin, and Mirzoev, these novels do not criticize Russia's medieval society, medieval terror, or Putinism for its attempts to promote neomedieval memory politics. On the contrary, they heartily endorse neomedievalism and fervently praise Russia's Orthodox Middle Ages with all the prescribed and expected enthusiasm.

Neomedieval Aesthetics and Slavery in Post-Soviet and American Popular Culture

Among post-Soviet neomedieval novels that are usually too lowbrow to interest critics, *Reading for the Despondent: A Modern Patericon* by Maiya Kucherskaya (2004) and Evgeny Vodolazkin's *Lavr* (2012) received widely positive coverage in

post-Soviet media.[117] In *A Modern Patericon*, which was published during Putin's first term, neomedievalism is articulated through Orthodoxy, which was unsurprising in a country emerging from seventy years of Bolshevik atheism.[118] The book was acclaimed by liberal critics, both religious and secular, perhaps not least because its timing was right.[119] In the early 2000s, fiction about the Orthodox Church, Orthodox believers, and Orthodox customs was becoming a fashionable trend in post-Soviet prose.[120]

Vodolazkin's *Lavr* (2012) was also part of this trend. Its author would surely have been well aware of the link between the success of his novel and its medieval setting. A historian of Ancient Rus by training, a fervent Orthodox believer, and a member of the Presidential Council for Culture and Arts (from 2018), Vodolazkin summarizes his academic work as being centered on "the demythologization of Russia's Middle Ages," meaning that he must enlighten his Western audience in his lectures and publications abroad on how wonderful medieval Rus was compared to its Western counterpart. He specifically venerates Ivan the Terrible as a complex and tragic figure and speaks approvingly of Medinsky's efforts to represent the Russian medieval period as a time of good and Russian medieval society as an idyllic social model.[121] Unsurprisingly, a writer who does not object to having his novel compared with Metropolitan Tikhon's writings[122] also has no hesitation in asserting that "[i]t is not empires that are to be feared, but their collapse."[123]

Plague, death, and rotting bodies are prominent in *Lavr*. Prayer is the main remedy against disease, and death is celebrated: "Weep and pray, O Arseny. And do not fear death, for death is not just the bitterness of parting. It is also the joy of liberation."[124]A grotesque anti-modern aesthetic dominates this novel, as it does many other post-Soviet texts:

> Smoke mixed with steam in the houses of Zavelichye. Clothes dried and cabbage soup boiled there. They beat children, yelled at old people, and copulated in the house's common space. They prayed before meals and sleep. Sometimes they collapsed to sleep without a prayer – they had worked so much they lost their strength. Or drunk so much. They cast booted feet on old rags their wives laid on their sleeping benches. Loudly snored. Wiped away spit that trickled when they slept and shooed away flies. Ran a hand over a face, making a grater-like sound. Cursed. Fouled the air with a crackle. All that without waking up.[125]

Vodolazkin's attitude to torture exhibits clear parallels with sectarian dogmas and the mystical turn in historiography. In *Lavr*, for example, after capturing and unintentionally killing the bandits who have murdered a sainted elder, the peasants decide that they have done them a good turn by offering those sinners a better chance of repentance and forgiveness at the Last Judgement. As in the sectarian dogmas, once the bandits have suffered a violent death in this world, they will be able to avoid suffering for all eternity.[126]

Vodolazkin salutes the Russian Middle Ages for eschewing the concept of individuality. He and several literary critics consider this one of his central ideological claims and an important device in his novel.[127]

In praising medieval de-individualization, he approaches very closely Dugin's opinion that

> [t]he "medieval order" in its religious (Catholic), class (feudal), and imperial (universalist) dimensions is what prescribed a person's sum and substance, made him a part of an external mechanical hierarchical structure, which simply had no room for an internal dimension. A person was part of a mechanism – ecclesiastical, political, and social – outside of which he did not and could not have any identity.[128]

Vodolazkin shares with many members of the Izborsky Club the belief that medieval history is repeating in today's world, and obviously does not think that this is a bad thing. As Ulrich Schmid has noted, he is eager for the medieval mentality and its piety to serve as a model for today's "godless, rationalist world."[129] Vodolazkin's vision of Russian medieval history – and of history in general, because Vodolazkin claims that the medieval chronicles help him understand the contemporary world better than any newspaper – all but converges with Vladimir Sharov's views. After claiming that ancient Russian history was indistinguishable from theology, he goes on to suggest that it was mainly concerned with understanding the ways in which Divine Providence has been expressed through human history.[130] According to him, a vision of history that emphasizes the moral aspect above all others guides Russia's understanding of historical events.[131] This logically brings him to the notion of a new "ideological consensus in Russia" involving the creation of "a new holy space: Putin's Russia."[132]

However outlandish this claim may sound to an American reader, Russia's mobmemory could well be viewed as a model of broader significance, despite the unique historical and political context in which it was fashioned. With its growing hold on the public imagination worldwide, political neomedievalism benefits from an aesthetic fascination with everything related to the Middle Ages that extends far beyond the post-Soviet context.

American popular culture, for instance, widely promotes neomedieval products, elevating them to global popularity. The American neomedieval fantasy displays strong similarities to the aesthetic of post-Soviet neomedieval novels and movies, and endorses the same anti-democratic and antimodern vision of society. An obsession with all that contrasts the Middle Ages to the modern world lies at the core of these texts and conditions their success, while a fascination with dirt, the corruption of the body, and graphic descriptions of bodily functions and disease form the aesthetics of the standard neomedieval narrative in both Russia and the United States. For example, HBO's international hit *Game of Thrones* (adapted from George R.R. Martin's novel series *A Song of*

Ice and Fire, and abbreviated below as *GoT*), which was as popular in Russia as in the rest of the world, offers countless parallels with the post-Soviet neomedieval utopias and dystopias that I have covered in this book.[133]

GoT's positive characters – the Starks and the Wildlings – are grubby and unwashed, and their surroundings are no more salubrious. In terms of physical hygiene, the derided Southerners look neat. This antimodern aesthetic is opposed to "boringly" antiseptic modernity: dirt symbolizes a radical rejection of the norms of modernity, not to say a revolt against them. Hence, the main feature of the sanitation-averse Middle Ages, much despised by humanists and Enlightenment philosophers, surfaces with new appeal for people who have hardly ever gone a day without bathing. The North's economic primitivism and backwardness are set against the consumerism of the South, which may well stand for capitalism.

The anti-modern aesthetic is not the only feature that makes post-Soviet neomedieval production so similar to its American counterpart. While in the US, no governmental support for slavery is even imaginable, slavery is roundly condemned, and any attempt to present it in a positive light would be political suicide, popular culture can aestheticize social inequality with impunity. *GoT* – along with countless box-office sensations, best-selling fiction, medieval-style role-playing games, single-player computer games, and re-enactments – encourages the audience to empathize with the "organic" neomedieval social organization.

George R.R. Martin's saga showcases the Gothic and the grotesque, and this fictional society bears an obvious resemblance to post-Soviet neomedievalist propaganda and the social projects of the Russian far right. Replete with theocratic monarchies and societies of estates, *GoT* goes a long way toward normalizing the quasi-feudal social structure and government-sponsored terror. As in post-Soviet neomedieval prose and movies, the lure of violence – from the state terror that governs all *GoT*'s Seven Kingdoms to sexual violence and vendetta – is at the heart of these ersatz-medieval societies. Blood and lineage are the key concepts that define the protagonists' rights and destinies in this universe founded on an inherited and rigid social hierarchy and personal dependence. However, unlike *GoT* with its fictional cults, post-Soviet neomedievalist production centers on Orthodox fundamentalism and its dogmas, demonstrating its intimate ties to the Kremlin's imperial agenda. The fact that *GoT* shares eschatological expectations with post-Soviet production points, however, to the significance of retrograde temporality for the adherents of neomedievalism.[134]

GoT has populated the American imagination with social inequality and slavery just as proficiently as the neomedieval post-Soviet politics of memory inhabits the post-Soviet mentality (although, obviously, without any high-level political support). Slavery and serfdom infest the gory universe of *GoT*. The slave trade, an important business there that is outlawed only in one part of the *GoT* world, is trivialized through a detailed explanation on the fan-curated *Wiki of Ice and Fire* site.[135] The Ironborn of the Iron Islands are subject to

forced labor that does not distinguish them much from slaves. Slavery is also common in the majority of Free Cities, such as Lys with its huge slave market. The Dothraki enslave their prisoners of war and conquered peoples. In Essos, slavery is a norm. Queen Daenerys Targaryen is, when it suits her, an abolitionist, but she eventually succumbs to the madness of the Targaryens and ends up unleashing devastating terror on her subjects. Probably the most telling example, and the one that brings the *GoT* universe closest to the movie *Kholop*, is that in the North, in Westeros, which is ruled by Ned Stark (the ultimately positive protagonist of both Martin's books and the TV series), slavery is prohibited but serfdom is not. The Stark clan is an ideal family, and the patriarchal relations of its members extend outward to "their people," who are socially dependent on Lord Stark and to whom the Starks are shown to be "good masters." Serfs ("smallfolk," which could almost be a parody of Dostoevsky's "poor folk") must fight when summoned by their lords, who have the power to try and execute them. The alarmed reaction of Craig Venter, a geneticist, to the cult movie *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), which features nonhuman bioengineered robots as a slave class in a dystopian American society of 2019, and the requests he receives to design humanoid lackeys, shows how freely these attitudes can pass from a fantasy world to the real one:

> The movie has an underlying assumption that I just don't relate to: that people want a slave class. […] But people ask me whether I could engineer a stupid person to work as a servant. I've gotten letters from guys in prison asking me to engineer women they could keep in their cell.[136]

Neomedieval production, rooted in anti-humanism and a rejection of democracy, is clearly thriving outside the post-Soviet context. As an article for *Salon* in 2016 had it: "Our 'Game of Thrones' fantasy: Democracy is almost nonexistent in Westeros – and we like it that way."[137]

The radical denial of humanism that lies at the root of the current fascination with "all things medieval" ultimately conveys a profound and pervasive disenchantment with humankind and humanistic values that has flourished far beyond the Putinist context. Offering anti-democratic social models as a solution to the problems of contemporary society, political neomedievalism exhibits a disturbing potential for nurturing the mentality that approves of the rule of terror, whether backed by state propaganda and implemented in politics, as it is in post-Soviet Russia, or left to its own devices in the realm of theories and fiction, as it has been in the West.

Notes

1 On representations of violence in post-Soviet popular culture, see Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol, Chicago, IL: Intellect, 2009); and Mikhail Iampolskii, *Park kul'tury: kul'tura i nasilie v Moskve segodnia* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2018).

2 On the role and political contextualization of history in the literary process in the early post-Soviet period, see Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991–2006* (Oxford, Frankfurt, Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2007).
3 On the "subtle and intricate feedback loop" between art and life in nineteenth-century Russian literary culture and its engagement with terrorism up to and including tyrannicide, see Lynn Ellen Patyk, *Written in Blood: Revolutionary Terrorism and Russian Literary Culture, 1861–1881* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017). See also George Gibian, "Terror in Russian Culture and Literary Imagination," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 1983, 5/2: 199–202; and a response to that article by Norman Naimark, www.jstor.org/stable/762256.
4 I introduced the analysis of this novel in my article "Rabskie mechty ob imperskom velichii," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2017, 144: 115–35.
5 Yuriev, *Tret'ia imperiia*, 98.
6 *ibid*., 16.
7 *ibid*., 91-92.
8 *ibid*., 137.
9 *ibid*., 101.
10 *ibid*., 277.
11 Mikhail Suslov notes an unprecedented convergence of fantastic literature with state-sponsored conservatism, which points to the close connections of the pro-Putin writers with the presidential administration and the Orthodox Church. Mikhail Suslov, "Conservative Science Fiction in Contemporary Russia," in *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, eds. Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), 105–28.
12 Yuriev, *Tret'ia imperiia*, 172.
13 *ibid*., 615.
14 *ibid*., 277.
15 *ibid*., 222–24.
16 *ibid*., 224.
17 *ibid*., 274–309.
18 *ibid*., 65, 198.
19 *ibid*., 203.
20 *ibid*., 220.
21 *ibid*., 199.
22 *ibid*., 203.
23 *ibid*., 175.
24 *ibid*., 197.
25 *ibid*., 198.
26 *ibid*., 203, 186.
27 "Let us note that along with the eschatological reading of the figure of Ivan the Terrible, there is also an eschatological reading of the oprichnina. If Grozny is seen as a future earthly judge, then the oprichnina is interpreted as a prototype of the 'heavenly army,' called to take part in the decisive eschatological battle, immediately before the End of the World. To prepare for it, the oprichnina must purify Russia, separate 'the good seeds of Russian Orthodox catholicity and sovereignty' from 'the chaff of heretical sophistication, foreignness.'" Boris Knorre, "Dvizhenie za kanonizatsiiu Ivana Groznogo," 524.
28 Yuriev, *Tret'ia imperiia*, 186.
29 *ibid*., 199.
30 Mikhail Yuriev, "Tret'ia imperiia: soslovnaia struktura," *Odnako.ru*, www.odnako.org/almanac/material/tretya-imperiya-soslovnaya-struktura/.
31 First published in Berlin in 1922, Krasnov's novel went into a second reprint in Riga in 1928-1929. In post-Soviet Russia, it has been republished several times, as Pyotr Krasnov, *Za chertopolokhom: Roman-fentezi* (Moscow: Favor -XXI, 2002),

Za chertopolokhom (Moscow: Kniga po trebovaniiu, 2011), and *Za chertopolokhom* (Moscow: Direkt-Media, 2014). The novel was also included in two editions of Krasnov's collected works: Pyotr Krasnov, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Intelvak, 2000), and Pyotr Krasnov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols. (Moscow: Knizhnyi klub Knigovek, 2012).

32 See Snychov on Sergei Bulgakov and Berdyaev in *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 430–39.

33 Alexander Dugin, "Evraziiskii triumph: Posleslavie." https://history.wikireading.ru/153917.

34 On attempts to claim the ambiguity of his image as an apolitical symbol, see O.V. Rvacheva, "Vozrodit' pamiat' o kazakakh: politika pamiati i kommemorativnye praktiki kazach'ego vozrozhdeniia na Iuge Rossii," in A. Miller and D. Efremenko, *Politika pamiati v sovremennoi Rossii i stranakh Vostochnoi Evropy: aktory, instituty, narrativy* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2020), 318.

35 See *Kommersant*, January 23, 2016. For details on a 2016 petition to demolish his monument, see "Demontirovat' pamiatnik fashistskomu posobniku Krasnovu," https://tinyurl.com/y66bo3c6.

36 "V Gosdume poprosili proverit' 'Vesti nedeli' Kiseleva na ekstremizm," *lenta.ru*, May 4, 2020.

37 Unless otherwise indicated, the references are to Pyotr Krasnov, *Za chertopolokhom* (Berlin: Izdatel'stvo Ol'ga Diakova i ko., 1922) (here, page 222).

38 *ibid*.

39 Alexander Dugin, *Konspirologiia* (Moscow: Arktogeia, 2005), 37.

40 Krasnov was well aware that they did not support his vision of Russia's future.

41 Krasnov, *Za chertopolokhom* (1922), 196.

42 *ibid*., 103.

43 *ibid*., 98.

44 *ibid*., 216, 263.

45 *ibid*., 37, 134.

46 *ibid*., 119.

47 *ibid*., 98.

48 *ibid*., 107.

49 *ibid*., 237.

50 *ibid*., 185.

51 *ibid*., 103.

52 *ibid*., 107.

53 *ibid*., 157.

54 *ibid*., 197.

55 *ibid*., 117, 114.

56 *ibid*., 226, 349.

57 *ibid*., 89, 120.

58 *ibid*., 232.

59 *ibid*., 37.

60 See, for example, "Rafail Berestov Raskol'nik. Otkrytoe pis'mo startsu Rafailu (Berestovu)," *iia-rf.ru*, July 3, 2020.

61 Unlike Yuriev's novel, Sorokin's dystopia has been covered in countless literary studies. However, its description of Russia's neomedieval social structure and relevance to post-Soviet memory formation has yet to be fully assessed.

62 Vladimir Sorokin, *Den' oprichnika* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2006), 21.

63 Marina Aptekman suggests that Vagrius's reprinting of *Behind the Thistle* prompted Sorokin to respond with his *Day of Oprichnik* in 2006. Aptekman, "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," *Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, 2009, 53/2: 242. See also Aptekman, "Sorokin i Krasnov: dva vzgliada na evraziiskuiu utopiiu ('Za chertopolokhom' i 'Den'

oprichnika')," in *"Eto prosto bukvy na bumage…" Vladimir Sorokin: Posle literatury*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko et al. (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 525–38.

64 Mikhail Yuriev, "Evropa voidet v Rossiiskuiu Imperiiu. Ili dostanetsia Khalifatu," *Bezformata*, 2019. https://ufa.bezformata.com/listnews/imperiyu-ili-dostanetsya-halifatu/81587198/.

65 Viktor Toporov, "Esli budet, to tol'ko imitatsiia: Opaseniiam Sorokina ne suzhdeno sbyt'sia," *Chastnyi korrespondent*, October 24, 2008. www.chaskor.ru/article/esli_budet_to_tolko_imitatsiya_658.

66 Averyanov, "Oprichnina – modernizatsiia po-russki," 153.

67 www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/community-media/morality-defense/2008/11/d14688/.

68 Anna Trefilova, "Ten' oprichnika. Vladimir Sorokin kak pisatel' i kak predskazatel,'" *Diletant*, 2012, 1. https://history.wikireading.ru/215325.

69 Vladimir Sorokin, "Oprichnina ot Ivana Groznogo do Vladimir Putina," *Diletant*, 2021, 1: 58–62; Vladimir Sorokin, "Pomutnenie umov v Rossii – vremennaia bolezn.' Interv'iu Irina Zavisha," *Polit.ua*, December 21, 2015. https://politua.org/gumanitarnaya-aura/8781-vladimir-sorokin-pomutnenie-umov-v-ro/amp/. See also Kevin M.F. Platt's review of *Day of the Oprichnik*: Platt, "Dress-Up Games with Russian History," *Public Books*, September 25, 2012.

70 Trefilova, "Ten' oprichnika."

71 "Pisatel' Vladimir Sorokin: 'Rossiia – ochen' bogatoe pole dlia al'ternativnoi istorii," *Izvestia*, August 24, 2006.

72 Aptekman, "Forward to the Past," 249.

73 For example, Krasnov, *Za chertopolokhom*, 255, 173.

74 Vladimir Sorokin, "'Zhestokaia slovesnost',' Vstrecha v intellektual'nom klube 'Svetlana Aleksievich priglashaet…,'" February 13, 2018. www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuVNzaF2jSs.

75 Vyacheslav Rybakov and Igor Alimov, *Delo lis-oborotnei* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2001), and *Delo zhadnogo varvara* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2003). On Chinese motifs in Sorokin, see Elena Pogorelaia, "Marche funèbre na okraine Kitaia: Vladimir Sorokin," *Voprosy literatury*, 2012, 1: 54–71.

76 On this novel as an apologia for the imperial ideology, see Aleksei Gorichenskii, "Imperiia nanosit otvetnyi udar," *Nevskoe vremia*, July 25, 2001: 3. https://orduss.pvost.org/old/pages/press_all.html. On the novel's anti-Western ideology, see Dmitrii Ol'shanskii, "Tukhlaia zaichatina," *Segodnia*, December 19, 2000: 6. For an analysis of Kholm van Zaichik, see Igor' Ermachenko, "Ot 'vraga na Vostoke' do 'vraga na Zapade.' Kitaiskie stratagemy russkogo postmoderna: istoricheskii kontekst," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 2003, 3.

77 Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx: A Novel*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (Boston, MA, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003). On the comparison of those novels see Boris Paramonov, "Vek oprichnika," *Radio Svoboda*, November 20, 2006; Anna Greshilova, "Russkaia arkhaika v romane T. Tolstoi 'Kys' i v dilogii V.G. Sorokina 'Den' oprichnika' i 'Sakharnyi Kreml,'" *Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosy teorii i praktiki*, 2017, 12/4: 29–32.

78 Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, 52, 55.

79 For example, George Vernadsky, "The Mongol Impact on Russia," in *Readings in Russian Civilization*, ed. Thomas Riha (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), vol. 1, 173–93.

80 Mark Lipovetsky links these allusions to the postcatastrophic "Russian world" and to "small-scale terror." Lipovetsky, *Paralogii: transformatsii (post)modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kul'ture 1920–2000-kh godov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008).

81 Alexander Prokhanov, *Simfoniia "Piatoi imperii"* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2007).

82 Prokhanov, "Ot 'spetsoperatsii' k 'voine narodnoi,'" *Zavtra*, May 19, 2022.

83 Prokhanov, *The Fifth Empire*.

84 "Vitaly Averyanov: Ukraina – lish' povod dlia Velikogo Sobytiia," *Izborskii klub*, April 4, 2022. https://izborsk-club.ru/22582. In this interview, Averyanov praises Putin's war in Ukraine.
85 Slava Shadronov, "Maksim Kononenko 'Den' otlichnika'," *Livejournal*, January 23, 2008. https://users.livejournal.com/-arlekin-/1066498.html.
86 The revolution is led by one Boris Berezovsky (Beryoza – Berezovsky's nickname in Moscow circles – means "birch tree" in Russian).
87 Maxim Kononenko, *Den' otlichnika. Utopiia* (Moscow: Folio, 2008), 285.
88 *ibid*., 15.
89 *ibid*., 105, 164.
90 Igor Kurukin and Andrey Bulychev, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' oprichnkov Ivana Groznogo* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2010).
91 Roman Zlotnikov, *Vivat Imperator!* (Moscow: Armada, 2001).
92 Kalashnikov, "Oprichnina – diktatura razvitiia," 234.
93 For an overview of the debates, see Irina Mikhailova, "Doloi 'nenastoiashchego' 'Tsaria'! Kampaniia protiv kinofil'ma P.S. Lungina v pechati i internete," in *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii*, 2015, vol. 2, 192–204.
94 "*Tsar*: interv'iu s Pavlom Lunginym" *Radio France Internationale*, May 17, 2009.
95 Ol'ga Deriagina, "Alexey Ivanov: V Rossii Ivan Vasil'evich professii ne meniaet," *Novyi kompan'on*, November 17, 2009. www.newsko.ru/articles/nk-410146.html.
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97 "Pravoslavnye radikaly 'podvergnut "Tsaria" autodafe. Soiuz pravoslavnykh khorugvenostsev nameren vystupit' protiv griadushche prem'ery filma Pavla Lungina 'Tsar,'" *Portal-Credo.ru*, November 2, 2009. www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=7&id=30594. Also www.newsru.com/religy/12nov2009/zar.html.
98 "Fond sviatitelia Vasiliia Velikogo prosit prezidenta Rossii ne dopustit' demonstratsii 'Pervym kanalom' na Rozhdestvo 'koshchunstvennogo fil'ma' 'Tsar,'" *Portal-Credo.ru*. January 6, 2010. www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=news&id=75402.
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100 Anastasiia and Boris Belokurovy, "Tsar' Petr," *Zatvra*, 2009, 817/29.
101 Igor Froyanov, "Lungin otsenivaet epokhu Ioanna Groznogo odnoboko i odnostoronne," *Russkaia liniia*, November 6, 2009. See also Froyanov, "A tsar'-to nenastoiashchii," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, June 21, 2009.
102 Averyanov, "Oprichnina – modernizatsiia po-russki," 154.
103 *ibid*., 150.
104 Elena Iampolskaia, "Ivan Groznyi imeni Tarasa Bul'by'," *Izvestia*, June 22, 2009.
105 In the nineteenth century, Russian serfs might be colloquially called slaves, and their legal status and social situation were, in fact, very close to slavery.
106 On GULAG's memoirs, see Varlam Shalamov, *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1992); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willets (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007).
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108 *ibid*., 17.
109 *ibid*.
110 Eliot Borenstein, "The New Russian and the American Psycho (Russia's Alien Nations)." https://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/the-new-russian-and-the-american-psycho-russias-alien-nations/#.Yg7MHi-B2qA.
111 In English, *Serf* or *Son of a Rich*. www.imdb.com/video/vi2368062233/?ref_=tt_vi_i_1. *The Truman Show* (1988) might be considered its cinematic predecessor.
112 www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8m6K_Er3BI.

113 Ivan Okhlobystin, "Nuzhno vozvrashchat' gosudarstvennuiu ideologiiu," *Izborskii klub*, February 19, 2019. See also Okhlobystin, "Doktrina, Pravoslavie i mir," *Izborskii klub*, September 13, 2011. https://izborsk-club.ru/16522.
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116 "Fil'm 'Kholop' vozglavil rossiiskii prokat v vykhodnye," *TASS*, December 29, 2019. "'Kholop' b'et rekordy – komediia zaniala 2-e mesto v istorii rossiiskogo kino," *Krasnaia vesna*, January 20, 2020.
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6

RE-STALINIZATION IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

The Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics and mobmemory formation cannot be accurately assessed without an understanding of their connection to re-Stalinization. In step with the evolution of the political situation in post-Soviet Russia, political neomedievalism and re-Stalinization have grown into mutually complementary trends in Putin's memory politics. Both are crucial to the formation of the post-Soviet mobmemory, both are focused on a return to a rule of terror and the elevation of its perpetrators. Combined, they produce a specific memory regime, the memory of the perpetrators, which forms one of the pillars of the social contract between Putinism and its supporters.

Re-Stalinization is not a sudden shift in Russian public opinion, as observers sometimes assume, but a memory politics that has been consistently pursued over the past two decades. It is a multifaceted process that includes governmental measures and grassroots initiatives directed toward the normalization and open glorification of Stalinism. Structurally, re-Stalinization exhibits salient similarities to neomedieval memory politics and includes several initiatives in a spectrum that encompasses legislation, monuments, museums, education, popular culture, and historiography.

Re-Stalinization resembles neomedievalism in that it is not limited to official politics: it is also a mass movement. Yet while re-Stalinization naturally involves the Kremlin's endorsement of the Soviet terror, Putin and his clique are by no means supportive of the communist ideology. Although mostly brought to heel under Putin, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) remains formally the largest opposition party in the Russian parliament, and praise of Stalin is an important plank in its platform. The nostalgia for Stalin, the cult of World War II, nationalist sympathies, and a paradoxical (for a materialist Marxist ideology) alliance with the Orthodox Church enable this party to function as an actual proxy for the Kremlin's politics, including the politics of re-Stalinization.

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The post-Soviet glorification of Stalin is a well-researched topic,[1] as is the long tradition of considering Ivan the Terrible and Stalin as historical doppelgangers that harks back to Stalin's positive assessment of Ivan in the late 1930s and 1940s.[2] The Stalinist terror is, not surprisingly, often compared to the *oprichnina*, by both its supporters and its critics, to the point at which a historical kinship has been posited. Yet the common goals shared by Putin's memory politics of re-Stalinization and neomedieval memory politics have still to be fully acknowledged.[3] This chapter is, therefore, not a study of re-Stalinization as such. Rather, it analyzes the initiatives that have been instrumental in blending Stalinism with fabricated memories of the oprichnina in the post-Soviet period. It shows that "[n]ations *can* repress with psychological impunity; their collective memories can be changed without a 'return of the repressed.'"[4]

Re-Stalinizing Russia to "De-Nazify" Ukraine

Under the Soviets, history was used to legitimize the Soviet regime by demonstrating the inevitability of the October Revolution and the advantages of socialism over capitalism. Marxist historical materialism presented the Bolshevik coup d'état as the expression of historical law. From the mid-1930s on, Russian patriotism became integral to Soviet history politics, and until the late 1980s, the Marxist philosophy of history and the Russian national narrative remained the main pillars of the Soviet ideology. Gorbachev's *glasnost'* (1986–1991) politicized history even further, as Russian democrats transformed history into their primary tool for discrediting the Soviet system by targeting the economic inefficiency of socialism and the history of the communist repressions.[5] In those days, politics was essentially formulated and conveyed in the language of opinions about the Soviet past. By the end of perestroika, Soviet socialism seemed to have been roundly discredited as an economic system, yet these rushed denunciations had not destroyed the foundations of the Soviet historical narrative in the minds of its former subjects. This was especially true of the Soviet insistence on the uniqueness and greatness of Soviet power and the loyalty to several symbols of Soviet historical propaganda, including the pantheon of Soviet demi-gods, the communist "patron saints" of various spheres of Soviet society.[6] This mental substrate provided fertile soil for the seeds of re-Stalinization.

After the market reforms were launched in 1992, public interest in the Soviet past began to dissipate rapidly. Several factors contributed to that, including that the market reforms were supported by a coalition of former Soviet elites whose backing was essential to keep communism at bay.

Unlike in Eastern Europe, however, the collapse of Soviet communism in 1991 did not bring about any lustration of communist leaders, perpetrators of Soviet crimes, or KGB informants. What the reformers were condemning was a regime in the abstract rather than its concrete representatives, and Yeltsin's attempt to permanently ban the CPSU was only partly successful (the

Constitutional Court castigated the party in 1992 for having usurped the structures of state and misappropriated government property, but refused to recognize communism as a criminal ideology, thus allowing a new Communist Party to form).[7] The mass idealization of the West (discussed in the Introduction) also contributed to the depoliticization of the Soviet past: the idea that the market economy would automatically deliver prosperity and democracy explains why projections of an economic model for the New Russia largely overtook the debates about the past in the early 1990s. The "fear of civil war," much pondered in the late 1980s and early 1990s, sealed the post-Soviet "pact of oblivion" that permitted all and sundry to be labeled "victims of totalitarianism."

In other words, the condemnation of "the crimes of Stalinism" was a short-lived political project that took shape in the atmosphere of the late eighties and early nineties. As such, it failed to profoundly affect the consciousness of post-Soviet people and has, on the contrary, laid the foundations for the gradual restoration of a largely positive image of the Soviet experience.[8] The post-Soviet unwillingness to "work through," in Theodor Adorno's terms, the Soviet past prepared the groundwork for the Kremlin's new memory politics of re-Stalinization that Putin has been advancing since he first entered office.[9]

A restrained iteration of Stalin's rehabilitation had in fact begun before Putin's coming to power, although it was not then an official state politics.[10] Disillusionment with the West, accused of not having been helpful enough to Russia in its transition to a market economy, disappointment with the politics of reform, and mourning for "the loss of a great country" contributed to changing attitudes toward the Soviet past.[11] A growing nostalgia for that past, and the formation of a communist and nationalist opposition to the Yeltsin reforms, had begun to elevate Stalin in Russian rankings of popular historical figures as early as 1994 (typically, in the 1990s and 2000s, he occupied second, third, or fourth place after Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and occasionally Lenin).[12] But, although radical nationalists and communists were already joining forces in promoting his image, the government's politics of memory and the dominant public discourse remained resolutely anti-Stalinist in the 1990s, and the history textbooks of that period largely held that line.

Several relatively cautious but easily readable symbolic gestures that Putin made during his early days in power encouraged the re-Stalinization efforts. On December 20, 1999, at a gathering of the KGB high command to mark the Day of the Chekist (the anniversary of the KGB, often called by its Bolshevik acronym, *Cheka*), Putin, the then prime minister, delivered a speech in which he reported that "A group of FSB agents assigned to go undercover and infiltrate the government [of the Russian Federation – D.Kh.] has completed its first round of tasks."[13] On February 22, 2000, Putin, now acting president, visited the war memorial at Mamaev Kurgan in Volgograd and met with war veterans there. His presence inspired several local attempts to rename the city Stalingrad, as it had been from 1925 to 1961 (more on this later). On December 30, 2000, Putin's decree reinstated the music of the Soviet national anthem for the anthem of the

Russian Federation. Sergey Mikhalkov, who had composed both the Stalinist anthem's original lyrics and their de-Stalinized version in the 1970s, slightly modified his words once again for this post-Soviet rebranding. However, most significant of all was the grandiose parade on Victory Day, May 9, 2000, which brought back memories of Soviet militarism and clearly signaled that Russia's memory politics was on a new tack.[14] The Stalinist myth of the Great Patriotic War – an integral part of the re-Stalinization campaign – was now heading up the search for a new Russian ideology.[15]

Shaped under Stalin, that myth had been a central element of late Soviet ideology.[16] Contrary to accusations of Russia's having unleashed World War II by signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in August 1939, among other preparations for war, the myth insists that the Soviet Union's policy was exclusively pacifist, despite its war against Finland, participation in the division of Poland, and annexation of Western Ukraine, Western Belarus, parts of Romania, parts of Finland, and the Baltic countries in 1939 to 1940.[17] The myth further propounds that the Soviets, under Stalin's leadership, single-handedly rescued the USSR and the world from the global evil of fascism. The world therefore stands in debt to the Soviet people, who paid the utmost price for the victory, and any criticism of Russia and its politics is fraught with ingratitude at best and pro-fascism at worst.

One of the war myth's primary functions is to free the Soviet people and their descendants from their collective responsibility for the Stalinist terror and participation in the Soviet repressions. It contrasts the real horrors of the war against Nazi Germany with a fictitious life of well-being in the pre-war Soviet Union, and marginalizes the violence perpetrated by the Soviet regime before and during the war. The myth blocked the memory of the GULAG and replaced the recollection of the victims' senseless suffering with that of the patriotic struggle against Nazi Germany, channeling the traumatic experience of terror into a sense of participating in a heroic narrative.[18] Another function of this myth was to claim that the messianic sacrifice of Russians during the war justified their exclusive right to challenge the global political order. The Russian nation, the myth further claims, has sacrificed itself throughout history for the sake of humanity, having shielded Europe from the Tatar invasion in the thirteenth century and saved the world from Napoleon before finally rescuing civilization by defeating fascism.

Stalin's leadership and his role as commander-in-chief of the victorious Soviet Army have always been central to the war myth. Putin's official statements about Stalin were, however, cautious enough, to a certain point. Yet the diffident re-Stalinization of the early 2000s soon evolved into a memory politics aimed at Stalin's partial rehabilitation. The war myth was co-opted to compensate for the lack of a clear ideological agenda, since reconstruction of the Empire could not yet be openly formulated as a goal.[19] Russia's East European neighbors interpreted the Kremlin's attempts to reconstruct the war cult – which in 2004 evolved into a large-scale commemorative campaign, in

preparation for the sixtieth anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany – as an intimation of neo-imperial ambitions.[20] The Kremlin's interference in the Ukrainian elections in the fall of 2004 was accompanied by efforts to promote the war myth as a propaganda tool in favor of Viktor Yanukovych, Russia's preferred candidate, against his opponents, whom Russian media broadcasting to Ukraine disparaged as pro-fascist bandits (in an allusion to the Ukrainian wartime resistance to the Soviets).[21]

In the mid-2000s, memory wars began between Russia and several East European countries, including most notably Poland, the Baltic countries, and Ukraine. Those countries claimed that they had been victims of two occupations (Nazi and Soviet), and accused Russia of communist terror and war crimes. Among those atrocities were the Holodomor, an artificial famine in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933 that cost three million Ukrainian lives,[22] and the execution of 22,000 Polish prisoners of war in Katyn and of thousands of victims of Soviet repressions in Baltic countries in 1940 and after the war. The Kremlin, in turn, took those countries to task for their wartime collaboration with the Nazis and for disrespect to the memory of the Soviet soldiers who had rescued them from fascism. All of this has, admittedly, been accompanied by a nationalist upsurge in the countries in question, whose governments proved themselves opportunistically quick to shift the blame for their own wartime crimes onto Russia and Germany and to silence evidence that significant numbers of their citizens had also collaborated with the Nazis and/or participated in the Holocaust. However, Russia bears the lion's share of responsibility for initiating memory wars with Eastern European states, and Putin's war myth was the motive force behind those wars.[23]

In May 2009, soon after the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008, Dmitry Medvedev, Putin's placeholder from 2008 to 2012 and now Russia's number-one war hawk, created a commission charged with countering "falsifications of history to the detriment of Russia's interests," its main goal being to protect the Stalinist narrative of the 1945 Soviet victory. This concept harks back to the infamous pamphlet *Falsifiers of History* that was published in 1948 under Stalin's immediate supervision to defend the USSR against accusations of having provoked World War II jointly with Hitler. In August 2009, Medvedev sent an open letter to Ukraine's president, Viktor Yushchenko, contesting his approach to the Holodomor, which Yushchenko had presented as a genocide of the Ukrainian people comparable to the Holocaust. Also in May, Russia's ruling United Russia party proposed a memory bill that ostensibly criminalized "the rehabilitation of Nazism" but in fact protected the Stalinist war myth. While memory laws in Western Europe defend the memory of those who suffered from crimes committed by the government or with its support, the Russian bill intended, above all, to protect the memory of the Stalinist state against those accusing it of war crimes.[24] In May 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, a slightly modified version of the bill was passed. The law penalizes "the dissemination of knowingly false information on the

activities of the USSR" during World War II with a punishment of up to five years' incarceration. In 2021, the law was amended to ban any comparison of Soviet and Nazi goals in World War II.[25] This new round of reinforcing Russian legislation regarding the past coincided with an escalation of the conflict between the Kremlin and the West, in which Putin openly threatened the West with a new invasion of Ukraine.

The importance placed by the Kremlin on the war myth for militarizing the country is reflected in three consecutive versions of *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* adopted in 2008, 2013, and 2016, which referenced a struggle against "historical revisionism" (understood as statements that contradict the Kremlin's memory politics and its interpretation of World War II).[26] There is an obvious connection between war-focused history politics, the memory wars in Eastern Europe, and the Kremlin's neo-imperial foreign policy. Like his supporters, Putin considers the collapse of the USSR to be the principal geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.[27] And from that standpoint, the former Soviet satellites and especially the former Soviet republics – and Ukraine first and foremost – ought to be returned to Russia's sphere of influence, thus denying those independent states their subjectivity.[28]

The memory wars had the additional effect of reanimating the Russian/Soviet messianic narrative, which resonates with many Putin supporters and centers on Stalin and "his Great Victory." In 2017, Putin told Oliver Stone, in "The Putin Interviews," that Stalin was a "complex figure," and a "product of his epoch," acknowledged that his parents admired Stalin no less than the rest of the Soviet people, and that while the "horrors of the repressions" should not be forgotten, it is a mistake to view contemporary Russia through that prism.[29] On May 10, 2019, Putin lauded "the descendants of those who went toward the bullet, to an almost certain death, shouting 'For the Motherland! For Stalin!'"[30]

Contrary to arguments that have sometimes been advanced, re-Stalinization is not limited to the memory politics of the state. Like the neo-oprichnina, it is also a grassroots movement, and that is where it acquires its true significance and dimension. Local administrations, political parties (especially the Communist Party), public associations, corporations, and private individuals stand alongside the central government in promoting it. The KPRF constantly appears before various city councils and even before the Russian Duma to lobby for more monuments to Stalin. A typical pretext for these requests is an upcoming anniversary of the Victory. The KPRF actively incorporates the notion of an "Orthodox Stalin" (meaning Stalin viewed as a true Orthodox believer) into its discourse.[31]

Museification and monumental propaganda are among the main instruments used by the politics of re-Stalinization. The newly emerging monuments to Stalin across Russia are a visible sign not only of the government's memory politics but also of a grassroots gravitation toward re-Stalinization. From 2001 on, such monuments have been erected in Vladimir, Penza, Tambov, Sochi, Mirny, Lipetsk, Oryol, Yakutsk, Orenburg, Novosibirsk, and numerous smaller

Russian towns and villages. And the pace only accelerated as time went on. Northern Ossetia, a region whose inhabitants were deported at the end of World War II, has been a leader of this re-Stalinization by monument.[32] The busts or statues are usually erected on the private initiative of a local resident or branch of the KPRF, often with support from the local administration. For example, in preparation for Putin's visit to Volgograd, a bust was erected there on February 1, 2023.

The refurbishing of the Kursk metro station in Moscow was especially controversial in Russia, to the point of catching the attention of the Western media.[33] The metro station was initially opened to the public in 1950. Its design – a representation of a temple with a monument to Stalin in its rotunda – symbolized the triumph of Russian troops in World War II. The words of the Soviet anthem, "Stalin raised us on loyalty to the people. He inspired us to labor and to heroic deeds," decorated the ceiling. In 1961, during Khrushchev's Thaw, both the statue and those lines were removed. But when the 2008–2009 renovation was complete, the praise of Stalin had reappeared.[34]

In December 2015, a Stalin Center was opened in the provincial city of Penza "to popularize and update those practices that were employed in Stalin's time and are still relevant today" across Russia.[35] The center was created as a debate club by the regional communist committee, which ranks Stalin's anti-corruption campaign and his planned economy among Stalinism's many positive features. Stalin's personality is apparently another draw, since, in today's political climate, people stand in need of a true hero "who would embody all that is positive, kind, and eternal, and would be an example to the younger generation."[36] (This is akin to a far-right trope that passes the ruthless dictator off as the embodiment of a fearless fight against corruption.)

In July 2015, a museum was dedicated to Stalin in the village of Khoroshego, near the small provincial town of Rzhev, the site of terrible carnage during World War II that was largely attributable to failures of the Soviet high command. Stalin visited Rzhev in August 1943. In fact, this was the only time he came even remotely close to the front line during the war – like Putin, he was not eager to subject himself to the hazards of war. The museum, which glorifies Stalin by exhibiting small (but purportedly endearing) details of his everyday life, including the exquisite porcelain on which the dictator dined during his stay at the humble home of a local peasant, was financed by Vladimir Medinsky, then Russia's culture minister, through one of the associations he runs.[37] In September 2017, a bronze bust of Stalin by Zurab Tsereteli, Russia's current "court sculptor," was erected on the Alley of Heroes in central Moscow's Muzeon Park. The focal mosaic in Moscow's Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, consecrated in 2020, originally portrayed Stalin, Putin, and other current leaders,[38] but those portraits were later removed. And in May 2021, plans to build a Stalin Center with emphasis on the Soviet Union's heroic history and the person of Stalin were announced in the town of Bor near Nizhny Novgorod. Local communist leader Vladislav Egorov elaborated on the purpose of this museum in an interview:

> The Stalin Center is a museum of our state's constructive epoch, whereas the Yeltsin Center [in Moscow – D.Kh.] is a museum demonstrating the destruction of what was built in the Soviet period of history. [Further, it will] counteract falsifications […] of the history of World War II.[39]

In August 2022, a Ukrainian newspaper reported that the Russian occupiers had opened a new exhibition in Crimea dedicated to Stalin's vacations in his state-owned summer home there.[40]

But, while some museums were opening, others were closing or being reorganized to fall in line with the triumphant memory of the perpetrators. The closure of the Perm-36 Museum and its reconceptualization as a memorial to the perpetrators is an especially telling example. The museum had been founded in 1994, on the site of a Soviet labor camp, to commemorate the victims of Stalinist and, more broadly, of Soviet terror. Supported by human-rights activists countrywide, it quickly matured into an important cultural center. But in early March 2015, the local authorities took over the museum and removed all reference to Stalin's crimes. Viktor Shmyrov, director of Perm-36, characterized this as "a symbolic gesture in a country on its way to re-creating a Stalinist type of state."[41] By the end of March, the museum had been closed and re-opened as a museum dedicated to "the administration and personnel of the Soviet camps." No longer a memorial to the victims of political oppression, it now serves to commemorate the "hard work" of the perpetrators, telling the story of "the system of camps, not political prisoners."[42]

Monuments and museums are certainly not the only way of celebrating Stalin and his rule. Attempts to rename Volgograd as Stalingrad have been another highlight of re-Stalinization since the early 2000s. Originally Tsaritsyn and given a Stalinist persona in 1925, the city became Volgograd in 1961 as part of the de-Stalinization campaign under Nikita Khrushchev. From 2003 on, there have been countless local endeavors to rename the city yet again. In 2004, Putin ordered that "Volgograd" be replaced by "Stalingrad" on the Memorial to the Unknown Soldier in Moscow,[43] which set in motion a new wave of local efforts to restore Stalin's name to the city. On January 30, 2013, the Volgograd City Duma deputies resolved to call their city Stalingrad on special occasions and during "memorial events."[44] In June 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, Putin proposed to hold a referendum of Volgograd's citizens on renaming their city, while emphasizing that the local authorities are the ones entitled to make such decisions. However, on February 25, 2015, the Russian Parliament rejected a proposal to that effect brought to the State Duma by the KPRF caucus.[45] In February 2023, the city was renamed Stalingrad for one day on occasion of the commemoration the 1942–1943 Battle of Stalingrad and Putin's visit. There, Putin again emphasized the importance of the historical memory of World War II.

The mid-2000s were marked by persistent attempts to decorate the streets and squares of Russian cities with Stalin's portraits for Victory Day celebrations. Some of these initiatives were launched by individuals, most often war

veterans and/or members of the KPRF. The debates around all these initiatives became especially heated in 2005 and 2010, during the 60th and 65th anniversaries of the victory in World War II. In 2010, the Moscow City Council discussed proposals to put up posters and information booths to educate the public on the important role Stalin played as commander-in-chief during the war, before ultimately deciding not to move forward with the project.[46] But on Victory Day 2010, Stalin's portraits were carried by members of the KPRF in St. Petersburg,[47] while "Victory Buses" decorated with Stalin's portraits drove through several Russian cities on that same day.[48] As Nikita Petrov, a historian and a member of Memorial International, points out, pictures of Stalin have been a popular theme of advertisements for Victory Day since the late 2010s.[49]

Stalin's portraits have also been displayed at several art exhibits under the pretext of demonstrating the aesthetic virtues of Soviet *sotsrealizm* (Socialist Realism, the key artistic dogma of Soviet literature and art). Among these, the one titled "The Myth of the Beloved Leader," in Moscow's History Museum in 2014 conveyed perhaps the least ambiguous message.[50]

Predictably, Stalin's images are used to symbolize political support for Putin's regime outside of Russia. A new monument to Stalin was erected in the separatist-controlled Ukrainian city of Luhansk in December 2015.[51] Stalin's portraits were also publicly displayed in the center of Donetsk, another separatist stronghold in eastern Ukraine,[52] which separatists planned to call "Stalino" during local commemorative events.[53] (Originally Yuzovka, it had become Stalin in 1924, Stalino in 1932, and Donetsk in 1961.) Overall, the military parades on Moscow's Red Square and the general atmosphere of the festivities in the third millennium have been compellingly reminiscent of those in the Cold War era.

In this context, it comes as no surprise that Russian officials and political activists have begun voicing increasingly positive, and at times even enthusiastic, assessments of Stalin. Putin, while typically condemning Stalin, a dictator, positively contrasts him with Hitler because Stalin "was no Nazi."[54] In 2021, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, classed "attacks on Stalin" among Western attempts to "revisit the results of World War II."[55] Journalist Maxim Shevchenko, a member of the Presidential Committee on Human Rights, openly idealizes Stalinism in the following terms:

> [T]he Stalinist People's Commissars, Stalin, Molotov, Kaganovich, Zhdanov, and so on, […] were people who did not serve themselves or their families. They served the country and […] its people. […] This is not an apologia for Stalinism. This is simply me trying to give a sober historical view of this problem.[56]

Observing the waves of Stalin commemorations in Russia, Mark Kramer asks how monuments to Hitler or his Nazis would be perceived by the world were they to be erected in German cities.[57] Anne Applebaum compares the attitudes

toward fascist and Soviet communist symbols, arguing that the swastika remains unacceptable while Soviet symbolism has passed for permissible kitsch[58] – before the war against Ukraine, at least.

Stalin is not the only Soviet perpetrator whose memory is publicly commemorated by the Russian government. Felix Dzerzhinsky, known in the Soviet tradition as Iron Felix, is another hero of history politics. He was the founder and patron saint of the Soviet secret police (the Cheka) and its successors – the NKVD, KGB, and FSB. On his orders, thousands of innocent people were murdered during the Red Terror. In St. Petersburg, his statues remain intact in front of the KGB-FSB headquarters and in the courtyard of the Dzerzhinsky Military Academy. A Soviet-era memorial plaque honoring him is set into the façade of the former Cheka building at 2 Gorokhovaya Street in Petersburg, a place of execution after the Bolshevik takeover. A new monument to Dzerzhinsky was erected in the town of Dzerzhinsk near Moscow in 2004, in Tyumen (Siberia) in 2012, and in Kirov in 2017. In 2021, two monuments were unveiled, in Crimea and in Krasnodar, to celebrate the 114th anniversary of his birth. His statute long stood facing the Cheka-NKVD-KGB-FSB headquarters on Moscow's Lubyanka Square, a symbol of Soviet totalitarianism. It was removed in 1991 after the failed August putsch and was replaced by the Solovetsky Stone, a memorial for the victims of the Soviet terror that had been brought by the Memorial Society to Moscow in 1990 from Solovetsky Island in the White Sea (the GULAG's very first camp).

The ongoing debates around restoring the Dzerzhinsky monument to its former place attest to its importance as a symbol of the memory of the perpetrators. In the course of a political altercation in 2002, Vladislav Surkov, who was soon to become the Kremlin's chief ideologist, argued against the intention of Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov, known for his nationalism and his calls to annex Crimea, to reinstate Iron Felix. In 2005, the monument, which had been kept in an exhibition park of Soviet-era monuments, was moved to the courtyard of 38 Petrovka Street, the headquarters of the Moscow police department. In 2008, the United Russia party submitted a request to restore it to its original place, but the Kremlin chose to withhold its support. In 2015, the monument underwent a restoration that resulted in the disappearance of graffiti inscribed on it during the monument's removal in 1991 that called Dzerzhinsky, among all else, "a murderer" and "a perpetrator."

The triumph of the perpetrators' memory was showcased in the closing of the International Memorial Society in December 2021, following a barrage of threats made by the Putin administration. Founded from 1987 to 1989 by former Soviet political prisoners, human-rights activists, and historians of the communist repressions under the leadership of the famous Soviet dissident Academician Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989), Memorial became Russia's leading human-rights organization and an important research center, making an outstanding contribution to the commemoration of the communist terror's victims and the study of the Soviet period. At the same time, it gradually came into its

own as a leading opponent of the Kremlin's memory politics and, more broadly, of the Kremlin's escalating violations of human rights and democratic freedoms in Russia.

After the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008, the Kremlin harshly criticized the Memorial Society for its "anti-patriotic" activities and threatened it with "administrative measures." A paramilitary raid of its St. Petersburg offices in 2008, which coincided with a Memorial-sponsored international conference on Stalinism in Moscow, was perhaps the best-known action taken on those threats. Finally, on December 29, 2021, the Memorial Society was closed by a decision of the Supreme Court pursuant to a suit brought by the Prosecutor General's Office, on the grounds that it had violated several restrictions enshrined in Putin's infamous law on foreign agents (a category that has been extended to encompass most human-rights associations and many independent journalists, NGOs, and think tanks in recent years). However, the authorities did not even try to hide the real reason for Memorial's closing, namely, its human-rights activism and criticism of the Kremlin and its politics of memory. Or, in prosecutor Alexey Zhafyarov's words, Memorial's fault lay in creating "a false image of the USSR as a terrorist state" and denigrating "the memory of the Great Patriotic War."[59] The destruction of the Russian opposition, including Memorial and Alexey Navalny's organization, now appears to have been part of the preparations for the war in Ukraine.

State-sponsored re-Stalinization goes hand in hand with occasional controversial statements from the Kremlin about Stalinism that scholars sometimes mistake for the Kremlin's attempts to fall "in line with dominant Western assessments of Stalinism."[60] But post-Soviet memory politics does more than "separate Stalin, the commander of the Red Army who secured victory in the war, from the Stalin who orchestrated terror against his own population."[61] The separation of those two images by Russian propagandists is designed to marginalize the image of Stalin-as-perpetrator, portray his crimes as insignificant (albeit deplorable) minutiae, and glorify him as a great leader. Moreover, Stalin's repressions are increasingly often seen as an accomplishment, although the Kremlin's proxies rather than the Kremlin itself are tasked with developing this view.

To better grasp the meaning of re-Stalinization, one must keep in mind an important feature of Putinism, that being its tendency to cynically appropriate, misinterpret, and exploit its political opponents' discourses. This strategy is manifest in the creation of "official" governmental or pro-governmental human-rights organizations, even as independent associations and activists were being suppressed. For example, Putin's Council for Civil Society and Human Rights was still in place at the time of writing.[62] But "anything goes" for the Kremlin's mnemotechnologists in their concentrated efforts to broaden its support base and suppress other narratives, including a disregard for the contradictions between the messages they address to different audiences, at home and abroad, often aided by a variety of proxies.

The same is true of the institutions of history politics. The GULAG History Museum, created in Moscow in 2001 on the initiative of the Soviet dissident historian Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, has been brought under governmental control. Now it is entirely detached from the opposition and the human rights movement, and its primary purpose is to usurp Memorial's place in Russian public opinion and political life, offering as it does a domesticated memory of the Soviet terror that avoids any association between the Stalinist terror and Putin's regime. This also explains Putin's decision to install an official memorial named The Wall of Sorrow in Moscow.

The public memorialization of the victims of the communist repressions had been high on Memorial's agenda from the outset, although it had been able to go no further than unveiling dozens of local memorials across the country, rather than a national memorial in Moscow. So Putin did that in 2017 to commemorate the centennial of the Bolshevik revolution, the obvious intention being to present the Soviet terror as an outcome of communist policy.[63] The Wall's primary purpose was to dilute the symbolic importance of the Solovetsky Stone, which has been the venue for the human-rights community's commemoration of the victims of the repressions on October 30 every year. The authorities argued that Putin's Wall of Sorrow should now be the site for such commemorative ceremonies, but under the auspices of the government, not the Memorial Society.

At the Wall's unveiling, Putin acknowledged that "blame of Stalin and his circle is justified" and alluded to the "horrors of mass repressions." Yet in the next sentence, he was praising the "Soviet government" for its correct understanding of external threats to the country and implying that repressions against a "fifth column" were not such a bad thing.[64] (That remark foreshadowed the repressions against "foreign agents" and "national traitors" who would later protest the war in Ukraine.) In July 2020, Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, officially belittled any comparisons between Putin's rule and Stalin's, and scorned attempts to attach a "neo-Stalinist" label to the Putin regime.[65] The war in Ukraine has finally ended any doubts that Putin does harbor a deep nostalgia for Stalinism and a yearning to reconstruct the Soviet Empire.

Re-Stalinization in Education, Archives, and Historiography

Re-Stalinization also targets historical archives (partially opened under Yeltsin in the 1990s), to shield the memory of the perpetrators. A 2004 law protecting the private information of Russian citizens significantly limited public access to the personal files of both perpetrators and victims and effectively impeded the investigation of crimes committed during the Soviet period.[66] A 75-year ban has been placed on access to those files, absent explicit permission from those individuals or their families.[67] This law was invoked in 2016 when Memorial published the dossiers of almost 40,000 NKVD officers implicated in Stalin's repressions.[68]

The 2000s were important for re-Stalinization in yet another respect, for it was then that the Putin administration began seeking to bring history education under its direct control. The stated goal was to standardize interpretations of history in the textbooks and to turn national history into a basis for patriotic education. Putin explained those goals at a meeting with history educators in 2003:

> Contemporary textbooks [for schools and institutions of higher education – D.Kh.] must not become a stage for a new political and ideological battles. [O]nly the historical facts should be laid out, to foster in young people a sense of pride in their country.[69]

Putin's meeting with school principals and history teachers in June 2007 signaled the regime's growing concern regarding the freedom of history teachers to choose among a variety of textbooks offering competing versions of Soviet history. Putin stressed that history had again become a potent tool of ideological propaganda, while at the same time confirming his persistent anti-Western bias: "The people who write our history textbooks are paid from foreign grants. Those who pay order them to dance the *polka-babochka*! ["to dance to their tune" – D.Kh.]"[70] The meeting's consensus was that Russian schoolchildren and Russians in general needed a positive account of the nation's history, that historical textbooks should foster optimistic attitudes toward the present, and that Russian students should be the lucky recipients of a single state-approved version of Soviet and post-Soviet history. And, although the attendees had, no doubt, been carefully selected, their views may nevertheless have reflected the feelings of many of their colleagues across the country. For example, when Svetlana Sorokina, one of the Yeltsin era's best democratic TV journalists, asked a Moscow school principal about Stalin, calling the dictator "a monster and a man-eater," the author of a textbook intervened, with "Well, maybe he was, but he is our ancestor, and therefore we should pay him due respect."[71]

Four days after Putin's meeting with the history teachers, the State Duma's Committee on Education sent the local authorities a list of textbooks approved for use in Russian schools. Three months later, in September 2007, a methodological manual for high school teachers was released with the Kremlin's backing. Published under the name of Alexander Filippov, a "political technologist" in Putin's service, it covered Russian history from 1945 to 2007 and provided that much-desired positive vision of the Soviet past, including Stalinism. The first draft had notoriously called Stalin an "effective manager," while its final version contains the following: "Stalin's Empire – the sphere of the USSR's political influence – was larger than any Eurasian empire of the past, including that of Genghis Khan."[72] Stalin is compared with Peter the Great and praised for expanding Soviet territory "to the former borders of the Russian Empire and even beyond," and winning "the greatest victory in any war." The textbook justified political repressions by their high returns in terms of Soviet economic development and by the need to modernize the country.[73] In other words, the textbook faithfully followed the logic of re-Stalinization.

An impassioned narrative, the textbook proposes a consistent strategy of re-Stalinization in history education and outlines imperialistic goals for Russia's future. It was clearly influenced by the writings of Yuriev, Dugin, and other far-right gurus. (Dugin had pitched a textbook of his own, but his proposal was not publicly accepted – which does not, of course, mean that he had no hand in the manual credited to Filippov.)

Shortly thereafter, Alexander Filippov and Alexander Danilov, Chair of Moscow State Pedagogical University's History Department, co-authored a textbook for students based on the aforementioned teachers' manual, which the Ministry of Education approved and recommended for use in high schools.[74] It developed a positive evaluation of Stalin's role in Soviet history and marked a new trend in post-Soviet historiography: in advance of the post-truth era, Filippov and Danilov were already proposing that historical truth be equated to the popular take on past events. They argued that since Stalin was, according to opinion polls, remembered positively by most Russians (in fact, about 50% at that time), he must have been a good leader. They clearly formulated that position in the article "Rational Choice," where they presented a Kremlinesque understanding of Stalin's role and the goals of Russian memory politics contrary to the vision of post-Soviet historical memory formulated in my works:

> The picture of national memory irritates some of our opponents. Dina Khapaeva was straightforward about it: "People want to forget about their criminal past, and it is a duty of intellectuals to oppose this tendency." But we support the opposing viewpoint. To fight against the national memory is senseless and dangerous. It is senseless because this memory will in the long run prove itself stronger than any textbook or monograph. […] It is dangerous because it denotes the incitement of a kind of civil war. So, if national consciousness believes that, repressions notwithstanding, Stalin did more good things than bad, as all opinion polls amply demonstrate, we are not going to hide it [from readers – D.Kh.] either.[75]

Filippov and Danilov were here referencing the survey *Name of Russia: Historical Choice*, whose moderators allegedly removed Stalin from his top billing and replaced him with the medieval prince, Alexander Nevsky.[76]

Since the Kremlin's interventions in Russian history education have been well researched, I will close this discussion by mentioning only the 2022 creation of an obligatory course in ideology for higher education students whose history unit was written by Medinsky.[77]

The Kremlin's educational initiatives had been sown in well-prepared soil. Countless biographies of the dictator ranged from empathetic accounts of his personal life to celebrations of the "great statesman" to openly hagiographical narratives.[78] In the late 1990s, post-Soviet historiography had already begun to revise the predominantly negative accounts of Stalin and Stalinism that typified the late 1980s and early 1990s. Oleg Khlevniuk summarizes this version of Soviet history as follows:

> While this ideology formally acknowledges the Terror's countless victims and the high price paid for the "great leap" strategy, it sees Stalinism as an organic and unavoidable means of addressing the need to modernize and prepare for war. Within these postulates we can detect prejudices deeply rooted in the Russian social consciousness: that the interests of the state take absolute priority, that the individual is insignificant, that the flow of history is governed by a higher-order law. According to this paradigm, Stalin was the expression of an objective historical need. His methods were regrettable but necessary and effective.[79]

The tendency to normalize Stalinism, however, went far beyond this. To give just one example, Boris Mironov, a well-known historian of Russia, has argued the need for a national history that would "cure Russians of a nationwide inferiority complex" and end the "groundless mortification of Russian national feeling." History should be enlisted in portraying the Soviet period as "a normal process of modernization" that Russian society underwent along with "the rest of the civilized world."[80] Mironov, like so many of his colleagues, staunchly defends Russian history against less "patriotic" historians:

> Soviet historiography was distinguished by its negativity toward the domestic history of the pre-October period, much as contemporary historiography now treats the Soviet period. [...] It may be that nowhere else in the world do historians portray the history of their own country so negatively. [...] Russia is no echidna among European nations but a normal European country whose history contains no more tragedies, dramas, and contradictions than does the history of any other European state.[81]

These efforts to provide Russians with a "usable past" are reminiscent of the position taken by German historians Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber in the controversy about the Nazi past known as the *Historikerstreit*. Nolte and Hillgruber argued that the Nazi terror was not as unique as it had sometimes been portrayed, that other dictatorial regimes (including the Soviet) committed crimes of a comparable nature, and that the Soviet experiment with concentration camps may have been taken up by Hitler. Jürgen Habermas, by contrast, argued against normalization of the Nazi past.

There are, however, important differences between the Russian and the German situations. By the time of the *Historikerstreit*, Germany had made unprecedented efforts to face its crimes against humanity, and the *Historikerstreit* helped to solidify a national (and international) consensus against normalizing the history of Nazism, hence assuring the democratic foundations of German politics. No similar anti-Stalinist consensus has prevailed in Russia. Instead, the normalization of Stalinism has entered the ideological mainstream.[82]

Stalin Lives! Public Opinion and Popular Culture[83]

Attitudes toward Stalin's persona underwent a considerable change in the post-Soviet era that is hard to dissociate from the success of the politics of re-Stalinization. In the early 1990s, Stalin had been almost unanimously condemned by the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet public as a cruel tyrant and the creator of the inefficient model of society in which they lived. In 2001, however, 38% of respondents to a Levada Center survey said they "admired, respected, or sympathized with Stalin," while 43% still expressed negative attitudes toward him.[84] In 2016, the number of Russians who positively evaluated Stalin's role was up to 54%.[85] The Levada Center's April 2021 survey showed 56% of respondents agreeing that "Stalin was a great leader," against the 14% who disagreed.[86] The percentage of those who assessed Stalin's role in Russian history positively was even higher in 2019, when it hit an astonishing 70%.[87] Levada Center researchers largely attributed this change in the evaluation of Stalin to opinion shifts among young people.[88]

As with Ivan the Terrible, changes in attitudes toward Stalin correlate closely with the state's investments in his image in popular culture. Since the 2000s, alongside countless works of fiction and nonfiction praising Stalin, several movies and TV series featuring him in a positive light have been produced with government support and aired in prime time on state TV channels.

These movies follow the patterns of the *perpetrator turn*, a recent trend in popular culture and academia, predominantly in cultural studies and memory studies, that shifts attention from the previous primary interest in the victims' perspective to that of the perpetrators.[89]

Presenting Stalin and other communist leaders as human beings in order to rouse empathy with them was central to the post-Soviet perpetrator turn. But it is also salient in several Western movies released in recent decades about Hitler and other Nazi criminals, although those cultural products emerged from a very different political context and pursued dissimilar political goals from those adopted in post-Soviet Russia.[90] Stalin assumes the same first-person narrator's role as that adopted by Nazi perpetrators in the TV series *Stalin: Live* (Dmitry Kuzmin, Grigory Lyubomirov, et al., 2006), which was billed as "the first attempt to let the impugned leader speak for himself." The audience perceives events through the dictator's eyes, which entails essential changes in how he is viewed and encourages the audience to identify with him. *Stalin's Couch* (Fanny Ardant, 2017) and the TV series *Comrade Stalin* (Irina Gedrovich, 2011) depict the dictator's last days and death with undeniable compassion for the sufferings of an old man. In the TV series *Vlasik, Stalin's Shadow* (Alexei Muradov, 2017), Stalin and his family are portrayed through the indulgent eyes of his chief bodyguard, NKVD general Nikolay Vlasik.[91]

Several other productions focus on Stalin's family. The TV series *Son of the Father of Peoples* (Sergey Ginzburg, Sergey Shcherbin, 2013), which aired on Channel One Russia, depicts Stalin's son, Vasily Dzhugashvili, not as a debauched drunkard (as he was, for instance, in Viktor Sadovsky's 1991 film *My Best*

Friend, General Vasily, Son of Joseph Stalin) but as a tragic hero, a true Stalinist, and a devoted son. In the TV series *Svetlana* (Evgeny Zvezdakov, 2018), Stalin's daughter's melodramatic love stories highlight Stalin as a stern but loving father (which is not necessarily the impression that the reader of Svetlana's famous memoir would have developed). Film critic Daniil Dondurey has clearly articulated the strategies adopted by Russian TV to keep the memory of Stalin alive and engaging by presenting the great ruler's cruelty as a point of attraction.[92] To this I would add that, given the rising appeal of commodified anti-humanism worldwide, the use of ruthless cruelty to enhance a tyrant's popularity has all the hallmarks of a winning formula.

Like Hitler[93] and Ivan the Terrible, Stalin is often shown being victimized by an imperfect society. A difficult childhood has been a common trope in Stalin biographies in the Soviet and post-Soviet tradition, serving to justify his character and affirm him as "a man of the people." As was not the case with Hitler, however, several Russian documentaries condone not only Stalin's personality but also his actions and policies.[94] For example, *Stalin with Us* (Vladimir Chernyshev, 2012), a TV series aired by the NTV Channel, states in the teaser for its first episode that Stalin was "A man who defined the life of our country for decades to come. A leader who defined the image of contemporary Europe."[95]

The consistency of the messaging and its historical veracity are minor concerns for Putin's propaganda as it neatly, even if implausibly, separates Stalin the revolutionary from Stalin the statesman and winner of a world war. Putin and his propagandists do not embrace the legacy of the October Revolution, which they consider the illegitimate overthrow of a lawful government and an act of national treason committed in wartime by the Bolsheviks that ultimately led to the loss of an empire. Hence, in post-Soviet films about the revolution – for example, in the TV series *Trotsky* (Alexander Kott, 2017) – Stalin the revolutionary is shown as a cynical gangster. But once it comes to the depiction of World War II in countless post-Soviet movies, he is a national hero. Tellingly, when *The Death of Stalin* (Armando Iannucci, 2017), a Franco-British black comedy that mocks Stalin and his clique, landed on the Russian entertainment market, Medinsky's Ministry of Culture canceled its distribution license on the grounds of its "extremist statements."[96]

The close link between memory politics and the propaganda of Stalin in popular culture manifests in an interesting incident. A comparison of Stalin with Mickey Mouse that was meant to play down the bloody nature of his rule led Russian lawmakers to request that Alexander Bastrykin, Chair of the Russian Federation's Investigative Committee, persecute Elizaveta Likhacheva, director of Moscow's Pushkin's Museum, based on Article 278, which criminalizes "insulting" the memory of war veterans.[97]

While popular attitudes toward Stalin's person shifted quite considerably, memories of Stalinism proved much more stable, which explains the relatively rapid swing in post-Soviet evaluations. Several opinion polls show that Stalin's rule persists in the memory of the majority of Russians as a Soviet Golden Age.

In July 1990, when mass disappointment with the Soviet regime reached its peak and most observers were claiming that Russia had broken with its Soviet heritage, Nikolay Koposov and I conducted, in Leningrad, one of the first opinion polls on Russian historical memory, which demonstrated that the myth of Stalinism as a Golden Age had survived the revelations of *glasnost'*. The same poll was repeated in 2007, when it showed that the myth remained largely intact. About two-thirds of our respondents in 2007, as in 1990, recalled the Stalin era as a time of "friendly, open, hard-working, selfless, and benevolent people living in an atmosphere of joy and optimism." Nearly half of our 2007 respondents claimed that the Soviet past had had positive effects on post-Soviet culture and morality. And their image of a happy life under Stalin was in no way influenced by what they reliably knew about the repressions.[98] According to the same 2007 opinion poll, 92% knew about the repressions under Stalin and two-thirds had no illusions about the scale of the terror, 63% estimating the number of victims to be between ten and fifty million. The Levada Center data backed up these data in 2017, finding that around 80% of its respondents felt well informed about the repressions. That number had changed little between 2008 and 2017, while sympathy for Stalin has grown.[99]

The argument that Russians are too traumatized by Stalinism to express their true feelings and moral concerns about the repressions was widely accepted among Slavists as a way of contextualizing these post-Soviet sentiments (at least before the war against Ukraine). As in postwar Germany, it will take time to process the trauma, the argument goes.

The concept of trauma has, of course, been widely employed in Holocaust Studies, where the scale of the victims' traumatic experience extended the concept of trauma to include both individuals and the collective victim of genocide. Many Germans too have interiorized the sense of historical guilt and repentance, both on the individual level and as a nation. Hence, despite the questionable relevance of applying psychoanalytical concepts to historical events, speaking about trauma in this context contradicts neither linguistic intuition nor common sense. But the concept of trauma may surely be applied to the Holocaust only on the assumption that Nazism is negatively evaluated on a governmental level and by the population. The use of the concept of trauma in the post-Soviet context also rests on the implicit assumption that post-Soviet society negatively evaluates the Stalinist repressions, even though many Russians, as we have seen, nurture fond memories of Stalinism.

Politicians and opinion-makers occupying leading positions in the post-Soviet establishment, who more often than not are second- and third-generation descendants of the Stalinist elite, typically remember their childhood warmly and hold their parents and grandparents to have been "the kindest ones."[100] Even those who express critical attitudes toward Stalinism – such as Victor Erofeev in *The Kindly Stalin*, a personal memoir of a happy childhood published in 2009 – convey a palpable yearning for that past. Soviet apparatchiks are now routinely represented, in academic publications and popular culture as "true

believers" in the communist cause, who themselves fell victim to the regime they created and are therefore, at least by implication, also deserving of sympathy and compassion.[101]

Can the concept of trauma possibly pertain to the descendants of perpetrators who believe that their grandparents and parents "lived a normal life in a great country" and who are proud of their ancestors' crimes?[102] To give just one example, Viacheslav Nikonov, a pro-Kremlin politician, the head of the Russky Mir Foundation, and a grandson of Viacheslav Molotov, Stalin's right-hand man, publicly asserts that he is proud of his murderous grandfather. In a hefty biography titled *Molotov. Our Cause is Just* (2017), Nikonov asserts that Molotov was not a marionette in Stalin's hands but a devoted Stalinist who shared Stalin's views and implemented them unstintingly in his life and work.[103]

Compared with Germany, there has been much less international pressure on Russians to work through their "Unmasterable Past." Post-Soviet society has never set up truth and reconciliation commissions like those established in other countries that also endured totalitarian or dictatorial regimes.[104] After the fall of communism, there have been no trials of perpetrators responsible for mass crimes and no lustrations. Not even President Yeltsin's decree banning the Communist Party in November 1991 brought Soviet communism to account, and the KPRF was reinstated as a political organization shortly thereafter.[105]

The reluctance to condemn Stalinism and the Soviet system provides a broad base for Putinism and facilitates the militarization of Russian society. The re-legitimization of terror in contemporary Russia echoes in the atrocities committed by the Russian army in Ukraine.

This sweeping re-Stalinization is sometimes viewed as a sequence of discrete and unrelated events, which validates the Kremlin's outsourcing of its memory politics to numerous actors indirectly supported by the state.[106] For example:

> [S]ome expressions of "support for Stalin" may not have easily discernible political effects, and […] [their] political connotations cannot always be modeled on the authoritarianism-democratization axis.[107]

The inconsistency of this approach becomes apparent, however, when the same observer claims that "a Russian wearing a hammer-and-sickle T-shirt is hardly glorifying the Gulag, while a German sporting a swastika probably supports racial supremacy, antisemitism, and a cult of violence."[108] But one cannot have it both ways: either political symbolism has a bearing on political orientation and memory politics shapes political opinions by means of that symbolism, or not.

The very existence of the Kremlin's memory politics of re-Stalinization may be openly contested by some observers: "Under Putin, a brief attempt was made to rehabilitate Stalin's reputation, but it failed, among other reasons because of divisions of opinion among historians."[109] I trust that at this point readers are well equipped to make their own judgement on this subject.

The Double-Faced Janus of Putinism: Ivan and Stalin

If historical facts mattered at all, the Izborsky Club members, Russian monarchists, and the prophets of the neo-oprichnina would feel no sympathy for Stalin. The sacred union between the tsar and the Russian people is a cornerstone of their faith, and they want nothing less than the restoration of Russia's theocratic monarchy. Yet Stalin, a communist leader and an atheist, played a leading role in the emergence of the Bolshevik regime that destroyed the Russian monarchy and executed the last tsar. In the 1920s and 1930s, in large part under Stalin's leadership, the Russian Orthodox Church endured severe persecutions in which thousands of priests were put to death, while atheist and anti-religious propaganda adopted a violently aggressive tone. But in the far-right imagination, Stalin is largely dissociated from the end of the Romanov Empire. He is instead viewed as an empire-builder who contrived to conquer half of Europe and reconstruct Great Russia under the new name of the USSR.

As we have seen earlier, the far right credits Ivan IV with founding the Russian Empire, although it was actually proclaimed only under Peter I, in 1721. This alteration of history is clearly motivated by the need to find someone to dislodge Peter the Westernizer from his pedestal. Together Ivan and Stalin are therefore made part of an imperial continuum of Russian history that is primarily focused on empire-building. And they are both prime symbols of state terror, which, as the reader will remember, the Russian far right considers the only means of rebuilding the empire and perfecting Russian society.[110]

The memorialization of Ivan and Stalin, a weighty component of Russian far-right memory politics, contributes significantly to their increasing popularity and influence. Alexander Dugin, in his mystical psychobabble, deems Stalin a reincarnation of Ivan the Terrible and praises him for embodying "absolute death," which, according to Dugin the Heideggerian, is a positive value and "the most important power and the essence of being."[111] Dugin venerates the dictator because "Stalin expresses the spirit of Soviet society and the Soviet people." He was "the Soviet Russian tsar, an absolute monarch" and the "greatest personality in Russian history." Like Ivan the Terrible, who built the Muscovite-Russian state, "Stalin created the Soviet Empire," a victorious country that won the Great Patriotic War, removing any "doubt about the greatness of Stalin as a historical leader."[112] Obviously, the fact that he was also a mass murderer does nothing to undermine this positive evaluation.

Other Izborsky Club ideologists (Andrey Kobyakov, Egor Kholmogorov, Alexander Eliseev, Sergey Alferov, et al.) appreciate Stalin and Ivan the Terrible as two innovators who used the oprichnina – a Russian national remedy that would allow Russia to fulfill its global mission – wisely. The Bolsheviks under Lenin could, by contrast, produce only a parody of it, because the Red Terror fell short and made no contribution to empire-building. Were Stalin alive today, this wishful thinking goes, he would have freed post-Soviet society from corruption, the rule of oligarchy, and its lack of the neo-Nazi "will for power."

In agreement with *tsarebozhie* doctrine, Eliseev thinks that Stalin's only downside compared to Ivan is that Stalin was not a duly anointed Orthodox tsar.[113] Igor Froyanov credits Stalin for having established a pan-Slavic union led by Russia, which, according to him, accomplished the nationalistic dream of pan-Slavist Nikolai Danilevskii. Froyanov is convinced that Stalin was a true Orthodox leader because he "contributed to the salvation of Russia," a messianic nation.[114] Here again he comes quite close to Snychov's position that Stalin brought an end to the "degradation" of Russian history and national culture that had taken place under Lenin.[115] Alexander Prokhanov equates Ivan and Stalin in his proposal to name a tank "Ivan the Terrible," much as a Soviet tank was named the "IS" (Iosif Stalin) during World War II.[116] For their part, Maxim Kalashnikov and Sergey Goryainov speak with special reverence of Lavrenty Beria (Stalin's chief of secret services) and his "oprichnina," acclaiming Beria as Stalin's man of the people.[117] This resembles the tsarebozhie reverence for Grigory Rasputin, Nicholas II's own man of the simple folk.

The Russian far right tries to convince its fellow Russians that both Stalin and Ivan have fallen prey to lies and misrepresentations concocted by Russian liberals and the West to counter their great achievements and outstanding service to the country.[118] Echoing Medinsky, Andrey Fursov calls them both the victims of the Western "information war" against Russia that the West is waging in "concert with our liberals":

> Attacks on Ivan the Terrible are attacks on the foundation of the Russian state. This follows the same logic as so-called "de-Stalinization." […] Attacks on Stalin are attacks on the USSR. […] Ivan the Terrible and Stalin […] are the axis of [Russian] history. Pluck them out and the rest will crumble. By denigrating Ivan IV, our enemies want to prove that at Russia's wellsprings were cruelty, dirt, blood, and that we should be treated accordingly. […] Monuments to Ivan the Terrible, and to Stalin too, should be erected in Russian cities. […] To me, anyone who hates Ivan the Terrible and Stalin is either a Russophobe or is working in support of foreign interests […].[119]

Just as with the historiography of the oprichnina, the merger of neomedievalism and re-Stalinization in the post-Soviet mobmemory finds a parallel in international historiography. American historian Jim Curtis's *Stalin's Soviet Monastery: A New Interpretation of Russian Politics* (2020) transplants the mystical turn into studies of Stalinism and employs Michael Cherniavsky's interpretation of Ivan in its analysis of Stalinism.[120] His reflections also echo the work of Sharov and Halperin (whose books Curtis does not reference in his text).

Curtis argues that the Bolshevik project was in essence one of "neo-feudalism" and that Stalin applied "the principles of medieval theocracy" to Soviet Russia. Like Sharov and Snychov, who implied that Ivan had shaped the oprichnina on a monastic model, he postulates that Stalin and his Bolsheviks

were inspired by medieval Russian monasticism. He also states that Stalin was "a man of his time," who had "a great deal in common with the popes of the Renaissance and Baroque eras." He explains Stalin's behavior in power by his youthful traumas, which is the same point that Cherniavsky and Volodikhin make with respect to Ivan IV. Fully in line with the mystical trend in the historiography of the oprichnina, he suggests that "the best way to conceptualize Stalin's relation to the Soviet people is to think of it as analogous to Jehovah's relationship to the Israelites." Perhaps inevitably, this logic guides him to conclude that Stalin had "persuaded himself that in creating the gulag he was acting out of love for people," that he viewed his camps as "an extreme version of the way an elder imposes monastic discipline on monks and nuns," and that he "persuaded himself that in bringing zeks to humility he was also making them happy."[121] Curtis uncritically adopts Russian historian Ilizarov's idea that in forcing people to confess under torture to deeds they had not committed, Stalin was apparently merely reproducing certain "forms of church life."[122] As we have repeatedly seen, this argument is also central to the mystical-turn interpretation of Ivan's terror.

The fusion of neomedievalism and re-Stalinization is also apparent in the attitudes of the Russian Orthodox Church and various religious sects toward Ivan and Stalin. Even though they both persecuted Russian priests, some highly placed present-day Russian religious leaders, including Metropolitan Tikhon and Bishop Avgustin, venerate those political doppelgangers.[123] This certainly goes far beyond what scholars have called, mostly metaphorically, "the Soviet secular religion" (meaning the various communist rituals) and points to the emergence of a purely religious cult of Stalin, modeled after that of Ivan.[124]

Some priests with close ties to tsarebozhie worship Stalin as a Russian saint, display icons of him, and assert that he was a true Russian Orthodox leader whom God had sent to punish Russians for their murder of the last tsar. The tsarebozhniks and neo-oprichniks advocate for Stalin's canonization,[125] and are winning growing support among Orthodox believers.[126] Dmitry Dudko (1922–2004), an ardent Stalinist and former GULAG prisoner who believed that the NKVD prosecutor who tortured him did him a lot of good, rationalized his admiration of Stalin and Ivan in purely tsarebozhnik terms:

> [H]ere in Russia, those who care about the state are subject to condemnation. Whatever the state does is looked on as a vice, a crime. This is how they have condemned the statesman Ivan the Terrible, who expanded Russia's borders, accusing him of cruelty. Although it would be worth asking, could a cruel person pray for all the executed? Isn't this an act of love? Strange as it may sound, over many years, only Stalin advocated for Ivan the Terrible, and in our time, Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg [Snychov – D.Kh.].[127]

For Shchedrin-Kozlov of the Oprichnina Brotherhood, Stalin belongs in the ranks of the sainted Russian tsars (although not as "the Red Tsar," as he has often been called).[128] According to Alexander Dvorkin, Kozlov believes the three mystical rulers who point to the path to Russia's salvation through "the play of 'mysterious forces'" to be Nicholas II, "the tsar-martyr," Ivan the Terrible, "the tsar-victor," and Stalin, "the Grand Inquisitor."[129]

Another telling example of a conflation of re-Stalinization and neomedievalism is a secular sect that holds the neo-oprichnina as its social ideal, esteems Ivan IV as the perfect political leader, and wants to rebuild the USSR. Sergey Kurginian, a political pundit and media mogul, founded the Meaning of Time movement and a community in the village of Chegary in the Kostroma region. The community occupies an abandoned plant renamed Alexandrovo sloboda after the oprichnina's capital. Investigative journalists claim that Kurginian possesses a large parcel of land in Chegary in addition to the factory and timber mill where his followers work for him.[130] He has invented a whole cosmology of his own – a "red metaphysics," as he calls it. In his cosmology, the Creator conquered a part of the Darkness and populated it with chiliasts to fight against it. The chiliast victory will lead to the re-creation of the Stalinist USSR 2.0, "a paradise on earth."[131]

The commonalities between neomedievalism and re-Stalinization often emerge in state-supported initiatives to erect monuments to Stalin and Ivan the Terrible, which frequently appear to be seen as interchangeable. For example, Ivan's monument in Oryol was allegedly compensation for the rejection of a monument to Stalin due to citywide protests in 2015. The same seems to have occurred in Ruza in 2017. Another symbolic example of the blending of neomedievalism and re-Stalinization in the post-Soviet context is the proposal to replace the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky on Lubyanka Square with a monument to Ivan the Terrible. (Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich put forward one such proposal in 2016.) In 2021, "a group of Russian creative activists," which included Alexander Prokhanov, Zakhar Prilepin, a far-right supporter of the war in Ukraine, and writer, and painter Alexey Belyaev-Gintovt, a neo-Eurasianist, petitioned Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin to restore Iron Felix to his former place.[132] The Moscow government reacted promptly, compiling a list of historical figures, and putting it up for a vote. Dzerzhinsky's medieval competitors included Ivan the Terrible's grandfather, Ivan III, but Alexander Nevsky took 55% of the votes, against 45% for the founder of the Cheka.[133] No decision had been made at the time of writing, but the Union of Russian Officers did ask the Moscow Prosecutor's Office to investigate the lawfulness of the monument's removal in 1991, and the Prosecutor responded that it had been illegal.[134]

The mounting attractiveness of Ivan IV and Stalin correlates with the growing approval of their domestic politics. While in the early 2000s, Putinism's main goal was to suppress and whitewash the memory of the repressions, the contemporary post-Soviet mobmemory has mutated state terror into a positive wellspring for the emergent imperial identity.[135]

The current Russian attitudes to terror must, however, be understood in a broader historical context, since the positive evaluation of terror has always been central to Marxism and the official Soviet doctrine. The lure of terror was, in fact, entrenched in the Soviet legacy, as three generations of Soviet people educated in the Marxist doctrine absorbed the celebration of it from their school history classes: the Red Terror, in particular, was justified as the only possible domestic policy and a necessary political measure that secured the survival of the Bolshevik revolution. The Bolsheviks never shied away from terror, and violence and coercion were their preferred political tools, both in theory and in practice. Lenin, whom Soviet propaganda baptized "the most humane of all humans," called for terror and implemented it.[136]

A century-long tradition of praising terror and an unwillingness to reflect on Soviet crimes arguably explain the Russians' tolerance of the idea of state terror. A sociological survey conducted by the Levada Center in the spring of 2016 demonstrates the rising popularity of repression as a political measure and suggests that Russians are "ready to accommodate to state terror and to accept it."[137] According to their data, the number of those who justify Stalinist repressions as a historical and political necessity grew from 9% in 2007 to 25% in 2017 while the number of respondents who consider the repressions an unjustifiable crime dropped from 72% in 2007 to 39% in 2017.[138] Significantly, Russians have no illusion about the nature of Stalinist terror: the number of those who believe that the terror was driven by random state violence or personal envy changed little between 2007 and 2017 (at 44% and 45% respectively).[139] Political apathy and indifference to Putin's repressions of the opposition before the war in Ukraine and acceptance and support of the war itself are firmly embedded in the post-Soviet political reality.[140]

Russians' feelings about tyrants and state terror find an astonishing counterpart in folklore. In countless Soviet and post-Soviet anecdotes, Stalin may appear cruel and bloodthirsty, but the joke is never on him. He is masculine and witty, rousing admiration rather than disgust.[141] And this folkloric image of Stalin comports well with that of Ivan the Terrible and his reign. As Maureen Perrie says relative to Ivan: "The paradox remains, that his image in folklore is much more favorable than his historical reputation would seem to warrant."[142] Yet it seems that in Russia it is not violence executed to establish justice that feeds the popularity of the tyrants Ivan and Stalin. The very ability to execute violence, rather, stands as a virtue and a measure of success. Putin's rule confirms the persistence of this cultural pattern.

Re-Stalinization and Neomedievalism in Action: The Wagner Group

A reliance on terror conducted by private paramilitary forces represents a natural development of Putinism. The Wagner Group, a private army of mercenaries, may be viewed as a pinnacle of the Kremlin's memory politics and a practical implementation of re-Stalinization and neomedievalism. Russian journalists traced its origins to the "Slavic regiment" – Russia's first private

mercenary unit, which was formed in Syria in 2013, where it lost in its clashes with ISIS and was evacuated back to Russia. (Soon after this, the same people were recruited to serve as "little green men" in Russia's annexation of Crimea.[143]) In 2014, Evgeny Prigozhin formed the Wagner Group and became its public face and owner. The name "Wagner" comes from the nickname of its commander, Dmitry Utkin, a former lieutenant colonel of the GRU (the foreign military intelligence arm of the Russian armed forces), who had adopted it in a nod toward his sympathies with Hitler and fascism. In preparation for the assault on Ukraine, home to a Slavic people, the Slavic Regiment was rebranded as the Wagner Private Military Company.

The Wagner Group had previously committed mass crimes in several African countries (Mali, the Central African Republic), and exploited the continent's natural resources. Human Rights Watch published its investigation of its crimes in the Central African Republic only in May 2022.[144]

As early as 2015, Russian journalists were revealing Putin's personal ties with the Wagner Group. The Russian news agency *fontanka.ru* reported that the Wagner Group was owned by Prigozhin, "Putin's cook" and a former convict sentenced to a twelve-year prison term in 1981 for robbery and assault. Prigozhin, who has received the Russian Federation's highest military honors,[145] ran a transnational business in the Central African Republic, Iran, and Sudan prior to the June 2023 mutiny.[146] According to *Novaia Gazeta*, Prigozhin's companies received government orders totaling 83.4 billion rubles in 2022, which is 1.7 times more than in 2021 and twice as much as in 2020. *Novaia Gazeta* concluded that Prigozhin was financing the Wagner Group from those budgetary funds.[147] Putin has also shown his personal support for the members of the group by presenting several of them with high military awards. For example, Putin decorated Wagner-Utkin, among other Wagner Group fighters, in an official ceremony in 2016.[148]

Yet the Western media did not pay much attention to the Wagner Group's links with Putin's regime until the war in Ukraine, when its participation in major military operations and mass crimes against Ukrainian civilians became obvious. Before the war, statements on the terrorist nature of Putinism had been regarded as biased and alarmist. The focus was – and to some extent remains even today – on "not provoking" Putin, not "crossing any red lines," and "avoiding escalation."

The war revealed the Wagner Group's re-establishment of Stalinist practices. Prigozhin's massive recruitment of Russian prisoners convicted for serious crimes, including murder (according to some estimates, around 24,000 of them[149]) is a prime example of re-Stalinization in practice. The Stalinist tradition of using prisoners as cannon fodder dates back to World War II, when the Red Army used GULAG prisoners to form penal military units (*shtrafbaty*). Special NKVD blocking troops ("barrier detachments," known under the acronym of SMERSH) were created in 1941–42 and positioned behind those potentially unreliable regiments to shoot "cowards" on sight. Regular regiments consisting of conscripts were treated the same way after Stalin signed "Not a

Step Back," his infamous Order No. 227, on June 28, 1942, which commanded the summary dispatching of anyone considered a "panic-monger."

Russian human rights activists confirm that Wagner Group were routinely used as barrier troops in Ukraine.[150] (Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen regiments have functioned in a similar way but behind Russian regular units.[151]) Andrey Medvedev, a former Wagner Group commander who defected to Norway, describes prisoners who refused to fight being publicly executed in front of new recruits.[152] (This too had been done in the Stalinist Red Army, to ensure that the prisoners' units would continue to fulfill their role as cannon fodder.) According to a Ukrainian commander, the Wagner soldiers "advance under fire […] littering the land with their bodies."[153]

The usual tactic of the Kremlin's propaganda is to blame crimes committed by Russians on their opponents. Hence, Putin claimed that Ukrainians are using barrier units against their own military, offering as the source of his information "some guys."[154]

Like the oprichnina, Stalin's military terror has also been endorsed in Kremlin propaganda. In 2007, Sergey Lyalin produced the TV series *Death to Spies!* that glorified the Stalinist SMERSH. The series had several sequels totaling thirty episodes – *Crimea* (Anna and Mark Gres, 2008), *Hidden Enemy* (Eduard Palmov, 2012), *Foxhole* (2012, produced by Alexander Daruga, whom the reader will remember for his celebration of Ivan the Terrible in *The Time of Troubles*), and *Shock Wave* (Alexander Daruga, 2012). Shown in May 2013 to coincide with the celebration of Victory Day, they provoked a heated polemic. Opposition politician Leonid Gozman, (who left Russia after suffering imprisonment for his antiwar protests in 2022) argued that NKVD officers should be treated as criminals like the Nazi SS, rather than being presented as heroes in state-sponsored films.[155] In response, journalist Ulyana Skoibeda expressed in one of the top pro-Kremlin newspapers her regret "that the Nazis did not make lampshades out of the ancestors of today's liberals"[156] (a transparent hint at Gozman's Jewish descent). After this exchange, Gozman lost his job in the government-owned technology company ROSNANO. But the cinematic celebration of the Stalinist SMERSH continued. In 2019, yet another TV series *SMERSH* (Oleg Fomin) aired in prime time, and in 2022, the TV series *SMERSH.New* (Oleg Fomin, 2022) hailed SMERSH and its "heroism" during World War II.

The Soviets always considered criminals their social proxies, using them to monitor and harass political prisoners in the GULAG, probably not least because the Bolsheviks had financed themselves through robbery. The recruited convicts of the Wagner Group, many of whom are also career criminals, while serving in the Wagner Group received no contracts and had no rights. Still, they were promised – and some have effectively been granted – the pardons that in Russia can be issued only by presidential decree.[157]

Russian human rights activists have identified several among the twenty or so convicts who posed for a photo with Prigozhin upon their return to Russia as criminals previously convicted of armed robbery and even murder.[158] Observers

were convinced that their sentences had been commuted based solely on their services in barrier detachments in Ukraine. The ease with which Russian society has accepted the restoration of these inhumane practices can hardly be unrelated to the success of the Kremlin's memory politics.

Addressing his "veterans" – convicts who had returned to Russia – Prigozhin told them "You have learned to kill the enemy" but added that they should not "use this practice in the territories where it is prohibited."[159] Yet the perception of the threat that these trained war criminals pose to Russian society as something new is based on a misunderstanding: Putinism transformed the relations between the *zona* (the Soviet and post-Soviet prison camps) and civilian society in Russia long ago, as will be discussed in the Conclusion.

Prior to their unsuccessful mutiny in June 2023, Prigozhin's criminals would have had no problem finding quite solid support in Putin's Russia. Andrey Gurulyov, retired general and current member of the Duma Defense Committee, even held that Wagner Group members could go on to have a successful political career in the Russian Duma.[160] They would indeed not be out of place in the Russian parliament, where several MPs have a criminal background.[161] Other Russian politicians, such as Sergei Mironov, a leader of the Russian parliamentary party A Just Russia – Patriots – For Truth, were ardent supporters of the Wagner Group and would surely welcome them as colleagues. Mironov even posted a photo of himself holding a sledgehammer gifted to him by Prigozhin that was decorated with the Wagner symbol, a pile of skulls, and a lengthy dedicatory inscription on the handle.[162] Back in 2018, the far-sighted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proposed legalizing mercenaries and legally protecting the soldiers of private armies.[163] His request paraphrased the language of the Russian memory law of 2014, which prohibits referencing the crimes of the Stalinist Red Army during World War II. Later, Prigozhin himself petitioned Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin for an amendment to Russia's Criminal Code forbidding "discrimination" against the former convicts who were now "veterans" of "the special military operation."[164]

The war in Ukraine has also put neomedievalism to practical use. Even though the Russian Constitution and Russian Penal Code criminalize participation in or the financing of mercenary forces (in Russia and abroad), neomedieval private armies like the Wagner group are openly fighting in their warlords' interests and with blithe disregard for the Constitution. By putting criminals above the law, as did the oprichnina of Ivan the Terrible, these armies point unambiguously to the existence of a legal status quo that altogether discounts the individual rights of ordinary citizens. Financed as they are by private individuals, these armies may be used for whatever purposes their warlords see fit, transforming the individuals who rule them into a new political force. Alongside the Wagner Group, these include entities such as Putin's semi-private National Guard and Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen National Guard, as well as the military wings of various agencies, including Redut, the GRU's private army.[165] In Moscow, the so-called "Sobyanin Regiment" (named for the city's mayor, Sergey Sobyanin) was reported to be recruiting mercenaries in July 2022.[166]

The question is, of course, if Putin can control these creatures of his regime going forward.

Neomedievalism and re-Stalinization, those instruments of the Kremlin's memory politics offer an outlet for unabashed praise for all the anti-democratic aspects of Russia's troubled historical legacy, including private armies and rampant terror, as the best, if not the only, way of ruling Russia.

Notes

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81 *ibid.*, 15, 17.

82 These ideas have been proliferating in secondary school and university history textbooks. See, for example, the open advocacy of Russian nationalism and the messianic role of the Russian nation, and praise for the imperialist political ambitions and ideology in Igor Chubais, *Otechestvovedenie* (*Fatherland Studies*) (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004); and A.A. Danilov and L.G. Kosulina's ninth-grade textbook, *Istoriia Rossii, XX–nachalo XXI veka* (Moscow: Prosveschenie, 2008).

83 I paraphrase here the title of Nina Tumarkin's seminal book *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

84 The distribution of responses to the question "Choose the statement that reflects best your opinion on Stalin's role in the history of our country" is as follows: Positive – 16%; Rather Positive – 18%; Rather Negative – 18%. www.levada.ru/2016/03/25/figura-stalina-v-obshhestvennom-mnenii-rossii/

85 www.levada.ru/2019/04/16/dinamika-otnosheniya-k-stalinu/.

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88 www.levada.ru/2021/08/04/stalin-tsentr-i-pamyatnik-stalinu/. According to this 2021 Levada Center survey, 60% support the construction of a Stalin Center.

89 For more details on the perpetrator turn, see Khapaeva, "Trendy Monsters."

90 Among films featuring Hitler at various stages of his life, see *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* (Christian Duguay, 2003), *Max* (Menno Meyjes, 2002), *Moloch* (*Molokh*, Alexander Sokurov, 1999), *Downfall* (*Der Untergang*, Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004), and *My Führer: The Really Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler* (*Mein Führer – Die wirklich wahrste Wahrheit über Adolf Hitler*, Dany Levi, 2007). By presenting Hitler as a human being, these films differ from their predecessors, which maintained a moral distance. See Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 239, 235.

91 On the creation of this film, see Sergei Toimentsev, "Avtoritarizm s chelovecheskim litsom: sovetskii geroi v postsovetskom baiopike," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2020, 5/165: 129–47.

92 Daniil Dondurey, "Proizvodstvo mirovozzrencheskogo musora," *Diletant*, 2012, 1. https://history.wikireading.ru/267827.

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94 See Boris Sokolov, "NTV idet kratkim kursom," *grani.ru*, March 4, 2013. https://graniru.org/opinion/sokolov/m.212231.html.

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97 https://msk1.ru/text/politics/2023/04/16/72225113/.

98 Khapaeva, Kopossov, "Les demi-dieux," 974.

99 "Bol'shoi terror i repressii," *levada-tsentr*, September 7, 2017. See also Lev Gudkov, "Proshloe kak budushchee," *levada-tsentr*, May 17, 2019.

100 On the "survival" of the Soviet elite in the post-Soviet era, and the transition of the Soviet elite into a post-Soviet elite, see Ilya Nuzov, "The Role of Political Elite in Transitional Justice in Russia: From False Nuremberg to Failed Sovietization," *UC. Davis Journal of International Law & Policy,* 2013–2014: 273; Maria Snegovaya and Kirill Petrov, "Long Soviet Shadows: The Nomenklatura Ties of Putin Elites," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 2022, 38/4: 329–48.

101 See, for example, Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), which describes the destinies of the high Soviet functionaries who had inhabited the famous "House on the Embankment" in the early 1930s, almost all of whom perished in the Stalinist purges. Slezkine's book has it all – "Anticipation," "Fulfillment," "The Second Coming," "The Reign of the Saints," "The Last Judgement," "The Afterlife." All it lacks is a discussion of Russia's unwillingness to acknowledge crimes committed under the Soviet rule. See Kevin M.F Platt, "'Dom na naberezhnoi': Iu.V. Trifonova i pozdnesovetskaia pamiat' o stalinskom politicheskom nasilii: dezavuirovanie i sotsial'naia distsiplina," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2019, 155/1.

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103 Viacheslav Nikonov, *Molotov. Nashe delo pravoe* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2017).

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7

WORKING THROUGH THE PAST RUSSIAN-STYLE

Mobmemory in Vladimir Sharov's Prose

Vladimir Sharov's writings and their reception reveal the unique challenges of dealing with the legacies of state terror in post-Soviet Russia. Commended as one of the most important achievements of post-Soviet fiction, Sharov's prose has been the subject of important studies by literary scholars.[1] In contrast to that perspective, here I analyze his texts through the prism of the politics of memory. Sharov's novel *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* (2018)[2] is of special interest to my argument because it epitomizes the fabrication of the post-Soviet mobmemory of the oprichnina and Stalin's terror in Putin's Russia and the morphing of neomedievalism into re-Stalinization.[3]

The Sharovs and Stalinism

The Sharov family's involvement with Stalinism provides an indispensable perspective on Vladimir Sharov's writings. According to his close friends and critics, keeping memories of his parents and grandparents alive was high on his authorial agenda. His friend, Mikhail Shishkin, also a writer, asserted in his posthumous celebration of Sharov that it is impossible to understand his prose adequately without understanding his relations with his father, who was a formative influence on the young Vladimir.[4] Another friend, the film director Vladimir Mirzoev, concurs that Sharov's prose was impacted by his family members' participation in the 1917 revolution and by the repressions later visited on them.[5] In the same vein, Mark Lipovetsky emphasizes that "Sharov's grotesque consciousness grew out of the impossibility of combining his family history […] with the catastrophe inscribed into that history."[6] Hence, prior to interpreting Sharov's novel, the question of the role played by Sharov's family in the repressions should be discussed.

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Fanny Efimovna Nyurina (née Lipets) (1885–1938), Sharov's paternal grandmother, belonged to the powerful Antonov-Ovseenko clan. Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko had led the storming of the Winter Palace in October 1917 in his capacity of Secretary of the Petrograd Soviet's Military Revolutionary Committee and is also known for the suppression of peasant resistance to the Bolsheviks, including the 1920–1921 revolt in the Tambov region. There, together with the future marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, he ordered the use of poison gas on non-combatants and formulated a mass terror strategy against villages whose inhabitants had joined the anti-Soviet insurgents (which included shooting civilian hostages).[7] Later, as Lev Trotsky's closest collaborator and head of the Red Army's Political Directorate, Antonov-Ovseenko sided with Trotsky against Stalin in the struggle to succeed Lenin, which ended in his disgrace and execution in 1938.

With Antonov-Ovseenko's support, Fanny Nyurina made quite a career, which began in 1928 when she started serving as Chief of Staff in the Office of the Prosecutor of the Russian Republic. Then, in May 1934, Antonov-Ovseenko became Prosecutor General of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and Nyurina was appointed his deputy. In September 1936, she replaced her patron (who had been sent to Spain to organize the Red Terror there) as Acting Prosecutor General and remained in that office until August 1937, in which capacity she was personally responsible for the repressions in the RSFSR during the initial phase of the Great Terror.[8] Nyurina was convicted as an enemy of the people and executed in 1938. Her brother, David Petrovsky (Lipets), another influential Soviet apparatchik, and his wife had already been executed in 1937.

Nyurina had married Soviet journalist Izrail Nurenberg (who was arrested in 1947 and died in the GULAG in 1949). Sher Nurenberg (1909–1984), their son and Vladimir Sharov's father, began his dazzling journalistic career in 1928 as a columnist for *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, the two main Soviet dailies and the main tools of Soviet propaganda. In 1938, following his mother's and uncle's arrests, he changed his name to Alexander Sharov. Changing names and publicly breaking relations with convicted parents was a common Soviet practice that did not always keep repression at bay. However, Alexander Sharov managed to hold onto his job as special correspondent for *Izvestia*. Relocated from Moscow to Rostov-on-Don in 1938, he traveled widely across the Soviet Union on various assignments in the following years. He joined the Soviet Army in 1941 and served as a military journalist during World War II. From the late 1940s to the early 1950s, Alexander Sharov switched from journalism to children's literature and continued his career as a writer until he died in 1984.

Vladimir Sharov took great pride in his father and authored several flattering descriptions of him, portraying him as a kind person with a tragic worldview who could still, at times, be cheerful and funny.[9] In Vladimir Sharov's memoirs – written shortly before his death and dedicated, as a last homage, to those who had influenced him – his father's stories about the war and the repressions occupy many pages.

Those accounts present Alexander Sharov in a highly positive, even heroic, light. Full of valiant yet borderline-burlesque details, they are retold by his son without a hint of criticism. In one of them, Sharov senior and Mark Fradkin, an official Soviet composer, slept on German mines, using them as pillows.[10] But Mikhail Shishkin was unconvinced as to the veracity of these stories and even fact-checked one of them. This story began with Alexander Sharov's interview with Abram Berlin, a famous biologist who, according to Alexander Sharov, worked on a vaccine against plague that he heroically tested on himself during a devastating epidemic.[11] Shishkin, however, suggests that Berlin "worked on the creation of bacteriological weapons" and performed his experiments on prisoners rather than on himself:

> One click on the internet and a completely different Berlin and a completely different story rise from oblivion. The plague vaccine was discovered long before Berlin, and he was working on the development of bacteriological weapons in a classified institute in Saratov. The experiments were conducted on prisoners. In 1939, he came to Moscow for a meeting and presented with all the symptoms of plague. The NKVD was brought in to prevent an epidemic. [...] That's the story. *Taste the difference.* [12]

Compared to his father's stories, Nyurina's arrest and execution play almost no role in her grandson's memoirs. When asked in a 2011 interview how his father had pulled through after his mother's arrest, Vladimir Sharov responded that his father had "survived by sheer chance."[13] This led the interviewer to the mistaken assumption that Alexander Sharov had been rescued by relatives as a baby, a plausible survival scenario during the purges. To the interviewer's surprise, though, Sharov revealed that his adult father had miraculously survived thanks to a minor award (the *Znak pocheta* or Badge of Honor) that "offered him protection." This is an odd explanation, as top-ranking generals and politicians who held the highest Soviet honors were being executed in great numbers, together with their families, at that time.

Sharov alluded to his grandmother only once in that interview, saying that she was "shot in short order" and that "all the family was imprisoned." His unwillingness to talk about who his grandmother was, what happened to her, why his father changed his name, and how he remained alive was so obvious that the interviewer finally said, "You don't want to discuss this."[14] The interviewer had every right to be surprised: the author of several hefty novels that address the Stalinist repressions was refusing to give any personal details of his family's participation in the Great Terror or to share his thoughts on the ethical issues raised by his family history.

As already mentioned, Izrail Nurenberg was arrested in 1947 and perished in the camps, but once again, his father's destiny changed nothing in Alexander Sharov's successful career. Vladimir Sharov was well aware that the correspondents of the central newspapers were members of the Soviet elite: he calls them "not only the

mouthpieces but also the eyes of the Kremlin, overseeing the whole country," adding "[i]n any event, it is well known that Stalin and the members of the Politburo read those newspapers from cover to cover."[15] Sharov certainly understood that his father must have made compromises to live on after his mother's execution and the imprisonment of his father (Sharov's grandfather), and that, no matter what his feelings were, he had to continue functioning as one of the regime's loyal ideologues. In the interview, Sharov turned the conversation by recounting how his father signed letters in support of Andrei Sinyavsky, Yuly Daniel, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the late 1960s. Surprisingly, though, he points out that the darkest period in his father's life came not during the Great Purges when his mother was executed or the postwar terror during which his father perished, but in 1969, when several of Alexander Sharov's books were pulled from publication and book contracts were canceled because of his support for dissidents.[16]

Shishkin, however, sheds some light on Sharov senior's survival strategies:

> After the war, when the persecution of "cosmopolitans" began, pseudonyms were exposed, close friends began to disappear, your father [Alexander Sharov – D.Kh.] wrote propaganda pieces under the guise of pop-science. […] Your father had to glorify the murderers of his parents and friends. He was forced to do it to survive, so that you would appear.[17]

Shishkin also offers other clues:

> Even the name is a witness to fear. Sher Nurenberg, in order to survive, had to become Alexander Sharov. Your father changed his name after his parents were arrested. […] It is impossible to imagine what was happening in your father's soul, when his parents had just been executed while he had to go on polar assignments for the newspaper and provide enraptured descriptions of the executioners' Arctic achievements.[18]

Bolstering my argument, Shishkin continues:

> Your grandfather and grandmother were killed by the power structure they had fought for. All your novels are an attempt to answer the question of why your grandfathers and grandmothers had been building paradise but ended up building hell, why it was that Russia did not become the new Promised Land, but reverted to slavery, to Egypt.[19]

Considering the compromises that Vladimir Sharov's father had to make to survive, Shishkin is implying that Sharov took a dim view of the revolutionary terror that had victimized his family. Yet he also assumes that Sharov's grandparents wanted to create a paradise on Earth, and hints that Vladimir Sharov had believed in that too.

Vladimir Mirzoev also indicates that Sharov's view of the revolution and its aftermath, including the terror, was highly ambiguous. He speaks of the "complexity" and "duality" of Sharov's attitudes toward "the revolution's dismal outcomes" to explain its romanticization in Sharov's prose:

> On Volodya's father's side, his grandfather and grandmother were caught up by the grindstone of the Stalinist repressions. His other grandfather, on his mother's side, also perished in the camps. After serving her time for being part of a traitor's family, his maternal grandmother spent several more years in exile. Yet all of them had been professional revolutionaries. Hence Volodya's duality, the complexity of his perception of the revolution and of its dismal outcomes. This birth trauma, the bleeding memory of executed family members, largely determined the poetics of Sharov's novels.[20]

In his eulogy, Shishkin benevolently assumes that Sharov's goal was to warn post-Soviet society about the dangers of dictatorship. But he complicates this straightforward interpretation by adding that Sharov also sought to "explicate how the country and its people understood themselves" under Stalin. He asserts that Sharov tried to preserve "another's memories," the memories of those who have been lost in "the folds of History's robe," by "reconstructing their beliefs and their understanding of right and wrong," hinting that showing how the Soviet perpetrators justified and rationalized their deeds was an important part of Sharov's project.[21] As Sharov himself stated in an interview:

> I am trying to understand what revolution is [...,] what motivated people when they conceived it and carried it through, when they dreamed of the beautiful and committed monstrous crimes for its sake.[22]

Vladimir Sharov never wavered in his insistence that the search for meaning in history – and especially the meaning of the Russian revolution and the Soviet terror – was central to his writings.[23] His family members' involvement in the terror, their survival strategies, and the quest for some sense in those events may arguably constitute a sufficient incentive for the rationalization of the Soviet terror in his prose. In Sharov's own words:

> And so I try, as best I can, to return them to their place in history, to understand and reinstate their ideas on life, on the world they lived in, their understanding of good and evil.[24]

His friend Shishkin seconds him:

> You said that the most painful thing for you was that people were disappearing and they were immediately surrounded by silence, as if they had

> never existed. This silence was the most terrible. Your relatives, like millions of others who were destroyed, went into oblivion, surrounded by silence, leaving nothing behind. And it was important for you to return them to their place in history, to understand and reinstate their ideas on life, on the world they lived in, their understanding of good and evil.[25]

The Kindly Ones in *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*

In many respects, Sharov's *Kingdom of Agamemnon*, which delves into the Stalinist repressions, offers a parallel to Jonathan Littell's much-acclaimed novel *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*, 2006), which is devoted to the Holocaust.[26] Sharov does not reference Littell directly, but, since *The Kindly Ones*, translated into Russian in 2011 by Ad Marginem, was world-famous and widely debated in Russia, it is hard to imagine that Sharov was unaware of it. And as we will see, the similarities between the two novels invite the supposition that Sharov was in fact influenced by Littell's work.

Certainly, there are many differences between Littell's and Sharov's novels and between the personal stances of these two authors relative to the events they describe: in contrast to the Sharov ancestors' direct implication in the Stalinist repressions, the Littells could never have been other than targets and victims of the Nazi regime. While Sharov refused to voice any political opinions, Littell has published several outstanding articles on political issues, including texts supporting Ukraine and suggesting to Russians strategies for resistance against Putin's totalitarianism (even though some may try to dismiss this as a disingenuous attempt to counter critics who have accused him of sympathy for the perpetrators).[27] Another critical difference: religion and medieval history are absent from Littell's novel but are fundamental in Sharov's book, where comparisons with Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina are key to his interpretation of Stalinism.[28] Yet these differences should not be allowed to overshadow some remarkable similarities.

The first has to do with the choice of narrator and main protagonist. Max Aue, Littell's protagonist and the story's memoirist, is an SS officer who served in Einsatzkommando 4a in Ukraine in 1941. The novel invites its reader to explore Aue's first-hand feelings regarding the murder of women and small children: through his eyes, readers witness his participation in the mass killings at Babi Yar. By making a perpetrator and an unrepentant Nazi a first-person narrator with whom the reader is supposed to identify, the novel revealed the full potential of the perpetrator turn in recent historiography.[29] In the words of critics, *The Kindly Ones* launched "the era of the executioner"[30] and uncovered "the secrets of the executioners' psychology."[31] While the book sparked a considerable controversy,[32] Littell's novel was much acclaimed because it provided, especially through the intimacy of first-person narration, "a unique insight into the perpetrator."[33]

What makes Aue, an unapologetic Nazi, such a special protagonist is that he is a cultivated man and an intellectual, a sharp-minded philosopher and a sublime linguist, a fine connoisseur of music and the arts (and not at all a hysterical antisemite, the author explains). In Pierre Cormary's words, "Yesterday, the scandal was to say that the perpetrator was an ordinary man. Today the scandal is to say that the perpetrator is a brilliant intellectual."[34]

Littell acknowledges that he identifies with his protagonist:

> I know that this message carries a very ambiguous meaning, but I have modeled this protagonist after myself. His worldview is not that far from mine, even if I am on one side, and he is on another.[35]

In other words, the author himself has at least partially fallen under the spell of this "classy criminal,"[36] thus helping to transform a Nazi perpetrator into "a model for humanity."[37]

In Sharov's novel, the Stalinist terror is narrated by Galina Nikolayevna, who seems to be Aue's opposite, except in one thing: she too calls for the reader's empathy if not compassion. She is an 80-year-old woman living in a nursing home, and is depicted as pleasant, sympathetic, and helpless. Her description retains unscathed the revelation that she copied out her father's denunciation reports to NKVD investigators, including accusations against herself, her closest friend, and her friend's father, who was tried and executed on those false charges, and also that she was a loving wife to her husband, an NKVD perpetrator. The novel's main protagonist, her father, Nikolay Zhestovsky, who also sometimes narrates the story, is, like Aue, an intellectual – in this case, a writer and a religious teacher.

Galina Nikolayevna tells her life story, and her father's, while serving tea and cookies to Gleb, a young historian, who is reconstructing Zhestovsky's writings from his NKVD file in the KGB archives. The novel opens with Gleb's arrest in 2015 on the false accusation of being an American spy. After eight months of interrogation and solitary confinement in the Lubyanka, the notorious Moscow headquarters of the Stalinist terror, he is released. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader learns that Gleb sympathizes with his investigator and gives him a farewell hug: the reconciliation of perpetrators and their victims is the novel's predominant theme.[38]

As the plot unfolds, the perpetrators in Sharov's novel are "further successfully humanized," allowing the reader to fully "empathize" with them, to use the terminology of perpetrator-turn theorists.[39] Sergey Telegin, Galina/Electra's adoptive father and later her husband, a high-ranking NKVD investigator, is Zhestovsky's closest friend. Telegin's family name is undoubtedly an echo of *The Road to Calvary* (1921–1941), a novel written by Soviet writer Alexey Tolstoy, an ardent Stalinist. (As the reader may remember, he also wrote a Stalinist apologia for Ivan the Terrible.) *The Road to Calvary*'s main protagonist, Ivan Ilyich Telegin, is Soviet propaganda's archetypical Bolshevik – kind,

reliable, handsome, dedicated, sympathetic, and staunchly living up to his high communist principles. Sharov's Telegin shares many of those traits. He is also good-looking, albeit not very bright, and he too is incapable of compromising his conscience. A "second father" to Zhestovsky's two children, Telegin loves them both dearly, and they love him back. This "kindest man" admittedly has "so much blood on his hands," but the fault for that, the reader learns, lies not with him but with his time.[40]

Telegin and Zhestovsky work together as a team, one as an NKVD officer, the other as an NKVD provocateur. In one instance, Zhestovsky provides psychological assistance to Telegin's investigation, becoming the mastermind who helps Telegin "crush," on Stalin's orders, an unusual prisoner, Gavriil Myasnikov. The real Gavriil Myasnikov (1889–1945), a Bolshevik leader, had helped organize the murder of Prince Mikhail Romanov in 1918. In the novel, though, the fictional Myasnikov is Stalin's political opponent and an important character in Zhestovsky's writings.[41] The fictional Myasnikov's interrogations and tortures are portrayed as an exciting intellectual duel, which requires much imagination and hard work on the part of this "family team." In the end, the prisoner is psychologically destroyed and then executed.

Unlike Littell, Sharov does not confess that he identifies with his protagonists, although his friends do it for him: "Then you gave your [characteristic] longhand to Zhestovsky in the *Kingdom of Agamemnon*. […] You always gave all your thoughts to your protagonists," Shishkin asserts.[42] Mirzoev seconds this opinion, saying that Sharov's protagonists' voices are indistinguishable from that of the writer's own: the chorus of those voices does not create dialogue but results in an authorial monologue, a single authorial voice.[43]

The distribution of roles and the division of labor between *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*'s characters confirm these observations. Sharov divides his two professional identities – of writer and of historian – between the novel's two central protagonists, Zhestovsky and Smetonin. Both are equally important to Sharov's refurbishment of the Stalinist terror and Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina: Zhestovsky, as author of *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*, provides a historical and religious justification and validation of Stalinism, while Smetonin, the historian and lawyer, is portrayed as the author of several works on Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina. Smetonin's ideas expressed in the novel closely resemble Sharov's own historical writings, attesting to the significance of the oprichnina and Stalinism as historical analogs for Sharov's thinking about terror.

Another similarity between the two novels is more obvious: the ancient Greek myth of Orestes provides the frame of reference for both. In Littell's story, it is Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy – *Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides* – that ends in Athena acquitting Orestes of matricide. According to Charlotte Lacoste, who has written the most thorough analysis of the function of the *Oresteia* in *The Kindly Ones*, this myth allows Littell to present Max Aue (whom Lacoste calls a "martyr of extermination"[44]) as Orestes, Littell as his advocate, and the reader as his judge who is ultimately to absolve Aue.[45]

In *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*, the parallels between the myth and the plot of the novel are also straightforward. Galina Nikolayevna, the narrator and the main protagonist's daughter, calls herself Electra and interprets her biography through this self-identification. She dubs her father, Zhestovsky, Agamemnon, and like Electra, she also has a brother. In Sharov's novel, Zhestovsky is writing a book about the Stalinist terror, which has the same title as Sharov's own novel – *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*. Zhestovsky is also a former prisoner and enthusiastic informant whose denunciations led to many executions during the Stalinist repressions. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* closes with the unambiguous message that Orestes will avenge, with Electra's help, the death of their father, Agamemnon, and that in the end all will be exonerated. The role that the myth plays in Sharov's novel seems very similar to its function in *The Kindly Ones*, and Charlotte Lacoste's reading of the *Oresteia* as an uplifting metaphor in Littell's story arguably holds true for Sharov's book.

The Perpetrators' Economy of Terror

Given that Stalinism and the oprichnina are inseparable in post-Soviet political debates and memory politics, the explanation of one through another has routinely been used to historicize and normalize terror in the post-Soviet discourse. In *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*, Stalinism is constantly positioned as a historical parallel to the oprichnina, if not as its reincarnation. Their juxtaposition helps us navigate the meaning of terror in Sharov's prose and uncover the machineries of post-Soviet mobmemory formation.

Ivan the Terrible is a crucial figure in Sharov's protagonists' search for the meaning of Russian history. Galina Nikolayevna/Electra constantly praises him; her evaluation of his role in Russian history is that of a great statesman, a founder of the Russian state who "extended the territory of the Holy Land" (meaning Russia), but who was also a tragic figure surrounded by boyar conspiracies and treason fomented by the West. Therefore, she continues, the oprichnina was inevitable:

> "At that time (we're talking about 38 [1938, the peak of the Great Terror – D.Kh.])," Elektra continued, "it was clear enough that it was decided on Stalin's direct orders, to rehabilitate Tsar Ivan the Terrible. As if he was neither a tyrant nor a villain, but progressive and truly of the people. The oprichnina once again. It was impossible to do without it, because the treacherous boyars, financed by the Roman Curia and foreign governments – the Polish Commonwealth, Sweden – wove conspiracies, tried to put an end to Ivan the Terrible with poisons and to hex him. Scholars were writing at the time that if you look at history objectively, Ivan IV was the Russian tsar who took Kazan by storm, conquered our eternal enemies, the direct heirs of the Golden Horde, the Kazan and Astrakhan khanates, then threw the khanate of Siberia into the bargain. A ruler who expanded many

> times over not only his own state but the territory of the Holy Land and carried out the necessary reforms that had earlier been mistakenly attributed to his Select Council."[46]

These views sound extremely similar to the opinions voiced in Sharov's historical writings: he blamed Ivan's terror on the boyars' treacherous plots and wrote that Ivan was a great state-builder – ideas that are given to historian Smetonin in the novel. In referencing "Smetonin's writings," Galina Nikolayevna is actually conveying the gist of Sharov's article "Ivan the Terrible's Oprichnina: What Is It?" In that article, Sharov-the-historian proposed a theory whereby Ivan the Terrible based his politics, and especially the oprichnina, on his sincere religious convictions. Ivan genuinely felt empowered, as God's anointed tsar, to pass sentence on his victims in a judgement of his own and believed that the sufferings of his innocent victims in this world would enable them to go, upon their death, straight to heaven, thus avoiding the torments attendant on God's Judgement of the wicked.[47] Here is how Sharov the historian expresses these views in that article:

> Grozny tries to impart to his relations with his subjects a strictly religious guise, perceiving his power, like that of God, as legally immune and requiring no defense or substantiation. […] [W]ith regard to the oprichnina, none of the sources even hints at the possibility that it can be understood in a "jaunty" [carnivalistic – D.Kh.] way.[48]

These ideas pass from Sharov's historical studies directly into the teachings of his protagonist, Zhestovsky:

> That is why […] the Terrible wrote, as clearly as he thought, that everyone who innocently perishes at his hands, the hands of a righteous tsar and viceroy of God on earth, will be saved. It is this word "saved," he explained, that is the point here; in addition, they will be freed from the torments of the Last Judgement.[49]

Since the religious explanation of Russian state terror – under both Ivan and Stalin – occupies a central place in Sharov's prose, an examination of his own attitudes to religion becomes important. Sharov's interest in Russian Orthodoxy can hardly be overestimated. According to Caryl Emerson, the investigation of religious thought in Russia was crucial to his project:[50]

> We have every reason to believe that for Sharov, eschatological motifs and religious wanderings were not merely narrative devices essential to the processing of political judgements.[51]

Indeed, if we are to trust his words and those of his close friends, Sharov viewed the world as Holy Writ and believed that all men are God's children.

For him, all the actions of the Russian people were a commentary on the Gospel. This is how Shishkin interprets the relations between Sharov's beliefs and his prose:

> For you, the world was a book written by God. God was the author of all the living and the lifeless, all are His children. You said that everything in Russian history is intermixed with faith, that the Bible is as alive now as it was when it was written. For you, the peoples living in the "bibliosphere" – Jews, Christians, Muslims – comment on Holy Writ with their entire lives, their every step, their every "yes" and every "no." You only recorded those commentaries.[52]

Several critics have suggested that Sharov's prose be read as postmodern irony, but prior to considering this interpretation, we must ask whether his attitudes toward Russian Orthodoxy implied any irony at all. Some critics do take Sharov's religiosity seriously and believe that he was "a radical Christian,"[53] and that, although he did not openly belong to any denomination, his religiosity affected his understanding of terror. His widow remembers Sharov being asked to lead an Adventist community. He declined but was profoundly moved by the offer. Some of his friends also believe that this encounter impacted his thinking and was a significant crossroads in his life, possibly contributing to his fixation on eschatological beliefs.[54] Both Shishkin and Mirzoev recollect Sharov talking about that episode. Mirzoev also recalls that Sharov enjoyed telling how total strangers had taken him for Christ or Ivan the Terrible:

> Volodya told that during his youth, deranged people would often come at him, some falling on their knees before him, trying to kiss his hands, and calling him Christ, while others made the sign of the cross, spat, and recognized Tsar Ivan the Terrible in him (or, more precisely, his reincarnation). These eloquent episodes happened anywhere – in broad daylight on a crowded street, in the subway, and for some reason, especially often in Voronezh, where Volodya would travel twice a year to take his examinations at the university.[55]

The fact that he shared this and similar episodes with his friends suggests that these occurrences – whether imaginary or real – may have played a significant role in Sharov's personal mythology. The fact that Voronezh features in these episodes is undoubtedly linked to his work on his dissertation on Ivan the Terrible, which he defended at Voronezh University. Yet it was not only urban "holy fools" who gave him such special treatment; his fellow intellectuals also developed a unique religious take on his prose. Some approached his novel *The Resurrection of Lazarus* without a shadow of postmodern irony. Critic Alexander Gavrilov recounts that he and his friends treated this text as sacral and even read it aloud while standing by the New Jerusalem Monastery.[56] This heartfelt reception can hardly be

dismissed as a naïve reader's failure to grasp the writer's irony. The understanding of Sharov's prose as religious teaching was clearly welcomed by readers and admirers who were actively looking to interpret Stalinism through the prism of Orthodox doctrines. Here is Gavrilov again:

> For all that is comprehensible and incomprehensible, all that is unbearably cruel or altogether inhumane in Russian history, Sharov has, as it were, invented new meanings. […] Meanings did not replace real life but were placed above it, giving a sense of the power of faith and of truth.[57]

In a similar vein, Sharov's widow remembers the incident that prompted Sharov to write his last novel:

> The impulse for the ninth novel was a phrase that Volodya overheard once at someone's house and was included in the text. Stalin's repressions were being discussed, and an old friend of ours, an Orthodox believer, said: "Yes, it was horrible, yet the Russian land now has many prayerfully interceding with the Lord. Russia had never seen such a great number of holy passion-bearers as were bestowed by Stalin's time." Volodya was stunned.[58]

The soteriological and eschatological beliefs of Orthodox sects play an important role in Sharov's *Agamemnon*. Like Snychov and other supporters of tsarebozhie, Sharov's protagonists see the murder of Nicholas II in 1918 as a cryptically paradigmatic event in Russian history, the origin of all the troubles that followed. The murder of Grand Prince Mikhail is the catalyzer in *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* that determines the later course of Russian history and prefigures the regicide of Nicholas II.[59] Galina Nikolayevna/Electra explains this to Gleb:

> The Civil War, according to father, was like a placenta, and the murder of Grand Prince Mikhail, to whom the Constituent Assembly was most definitely going to transfer the Russian throne, is the embryo of all those disasters that awaited us. Because if he, if Myasnikov, had not killed Mikhail Romanov, and other grand princes had not been killed after him in Alapayevsk and Nicholas II in Ekaterinburg, the Civil War would have lasted for years and years, and who knows how it would have ended?[60]

The restoration of the Romanov dynasty in Russia is the goal of one of the characters – Evgeny Romanov, a descendant of that dynasty and a KGB spy. That the Antichrist holds sway over Russia because God left it after the regicide is the central tsarebozhie dogma. Holy Russia taken hostage by Satan is a premise in Snychov's writings too. It opens his magnum opus and supplies him thereafter with a pretext for remaking Russian history as he pleases. Like Snychov, Sharov's protagonists suspect Soviet Russia to be Satan's realm:

> In [Zhestovsky's] novel, Soviet Russia is the kingdom of Satan. As soon as we betrayed our faith, the demons whom the Lord once cast down into hell and gave them the souls of inveterate sinners as their fodder came clambering out of their abyss in an uncountable horde, in all their uncountable multitudes. The Savior left, and his vacated throne was taken by Satan.[61]

In *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*, Sharov inserts those very ideas into Zhestovsky's novel, which his protagonist-writer grounds in Smetonin's historical articles:[62] "Legalities of the Oprichnina under Ivan the Terrible," "Divine and Civil Law in Cases Concerning the Old Believer Heresy," and "The Legal Consciousness of the Russian Community."[63]

Smetonin's thesis is that if a serious crime took place in a territory under the jurisdiction of the peasant community, the community would "settle the matter by handing one of its most worthless members over to law enforcement." This person, "guilty without guilt," would then go to "hard labor with the realization that the peasant community had finally found a use for him. He had taken upon himself a very important and very necessary service, thanks to which the community would have no further misunderstandings with the police." Smetonin then proceeds to argue that there is "no other way to save the world, to return the Savior to it."[64] This is, of course, a reiteration of the Slavophiles' idea of *sobornost'*.

State power is considered sacred by the novel's protagonists because "any power is an embodiment of God on Earth" (Satan's purported ownership of Soviet Russia notwithstanding). Following the Apostle Paul, Zhestovsky declares that all power is God-given, including the Soviet regime, which is divine because it stands against chaos and protects its subjects.[65] This sounds very close to Snychov's understanding of the nature of the Soviet regime as part of God's dispensation for Russia: "Soviet power is not merely godlessness and the greatest threat in the world; it is also both a mystery and an instrument of Divine Providence."[66]

Reflections on the sacred nature of power lead Sharov's characters to conclude that interrogation is essentially indistinguishable from confession in church. He has Zhestovsky say that a confession elicited during interrogation – that being the calumniation, betrayal, or denunciation of his friends and acquaintances – gave him a satisfaction as euphoric as any religious confession ever had. The divine nature of state power has here transformed torture into a joint act of creation, which is not sexual, as in his other works, but a spiritual act of confessional catharsis.

> I [Zhestovsky – D.Kh.] was interrogated day after day, but I firmly stood my ground, refusing to give any testimony. And then, I don't know how it came about, maybe an accumulation of fatigue, but I answered a completely innocent question, and it was as if a dam had burst. I spoke, I spoke – and couldn't stop. When I finished it was early morning, and

> suddenly I felt in myself the same exultation as after confession. And since then, it has been so every time I have informed [on someone to the authorities – D.Kh.]. It was the same in exile, or even after I was released, when I wrote my weekly reports [denunciations – D.Kh.] to the district commissioner who had recruited me earlier, […] and here, in the *zona*, when the camp warder wants to talk to me. But one day I suddenly realized that this was not just right but was by design, because in the kingdom of Satan, the interrogator's office or the criminal investigator's office, which are much the same, is our true confessional.[67]

Hence, in Sharov's novel, the idea of sacrifice gives meaning and purpose to the victims' sufferings. No longer random casualties of senseless state terror, they fulfill their spiritual duty in an act of religious self-sacrifice that is necessary for the salvation of their own souls as well as those of other sinners. Holy Russia needs these innocent victims to pray for her in heaven and to atone for the Russians' sins. In this brutal logic, everything that happens during interrogation – the denunciations of relatives and friends, all acts of cowardice and treachery – is justified and offset. Here is how a character in the novel, Zhestovsky's spiritual pupil and also a GULAG prisoner, describes that to Galina Nikolayevna:

> "No," said Zhestovsky, "you have to sign [your confession]." "Why so?" […] ["I]n order that our sins may be prayed away, that we may be saved, God's world must be filled to the brim with grace. That is, thousands upon thousands of new saints and great martyrs are needed. The state that forces us to denounce the innocent to be slain and we who give them up are together creating this atoning sacrifice. […]"
>
> "Which is to say that all is not in vain – neither our sufferings and our deaths, nor even our cowardice is in vain, when in the last hope of saving our skins, we informed, one by one, on everyone we knew." That is, he [Zhestovsky – D.Kh.] explained to us our guilt, the purpose and the meaning of what we had endured, and suddenly it transpired that we were not random victims but on the contrary, we carried, honorably and without grumbling, everything that was predestined as just for us. It gave many the strength to live to see the day when we would be set free.[68]

Murdering the righteous to multiply the number of prayers represents the economy of the perpetrators: the more innocent people are killed, the more prayers Russia and the perpetrators will rack up for their common redemption. Stalinist perpetrators murdering innocent people without trial embody, to the same extent as Ivan's oprichnina, the Divine Judgement:

> "And what happens when they are killed?" asks your father [Zhestovsky – D.Kh.] and gives his own answer: "The result is that there are more martyrs and passion-bearers in heaven, more of the prayerful, more intercessors. And

> together they all offer up a prayer for what once was a holy land and what were once holy people. In chorus they appeal to the Savior, asking and pleading with him to return and to punish the Antichrist. To take again under his wing the people he had once chosen." […] [A]nd here follows another of Smetonin's paradoxes: "By killing the righteous with our own hands, by bringing forth more and more martyrs, we are not only preparing Satan's end, we are saving ourselves. There is no doubt about it. There's nothing to argue about."[69]

This perpetrator economy of terror converts the torments and death of the innocent into a collective sacrifice for Holy Russia, offering the living – the perpetrators – their own chance for salvation.

In the same vein, Zhestovsky explains, with reference to Ivan the Terrible's terror, that this was a sacrificial ritual and an act of "unspeakable benevolence," because if "we [the people] are one," everybody is guilty by default, but once the sacrifice is made, those who remain alive can hope for salvation.[70] It also comports with Snychov's teaching about "the sacred mystery of the Church's *sobornost'*, wherein everyone prays for all as for himself" and where each is responsible for the whole.[71] The rationalization of the repressions in Sharov's prose resonates with the views of Stalinist revisionists as well as of the tsarebozhniks:

> According to Dudko [Dmitry Dudko, a former GULAG prisoner who became a Stalinist apologist and tsarebozhnik – D.Kh.], Stalin did not annihilate people, but rather saved them. This is a complete revision of the history of persecutions during the Soviet period.[72]

The tsarebozhie desire to canonize all of Russia's rulers including Stalin (based on a belief in the sacrality of the Russian state) is also oddly similar to Sharov's descriptions of Lenin and Stalin as saints. Like Ivan the Terrible, they sacrificed innocent victims whose mission will then be to pray in heaven for God's benevolence and the redemption of Holy Russia. In this theology, Stalin emerges as a religious leader who tirelessly offered sacrifices to atone for the vices of the Russian people.[73]

As we have seen, requests for Ivan the Terrible's canonization as the founder of the Russian state go hand in hand with the push for Stalin's canonization as a builder of the Soviet Empire. Therefore, like the tsarebozhniks and the Russian far right, Galina/Electra, following Zhestovsky, forbids any berating of Stalin:

> The thousands upon thousands of the slain, the holy men, our sainted intercessors, because those he [Stalin – D. Kh.] killed, he saved them all and vindicated them all, and carried them all in his arms across the moat of the Last Judgement.[74]

All those ideas resonate with Nikolay Fyodorov's religious philosophy. Fyodorov (1829–1903), who influenced several Russian writers, viewed Russian messianism as a way of creating a Russian nationalist paradise on earth. He believed in the resurrection of the dead by science, which would end procreation and render women, and the sins they bring into the world, inconsequential. His anti-individual, anti-Western, and misogynistic thinking celebrates Russian autocracy and the patriarchal Russian peasant community. The medieval Muscovite tsardom is idealized as a state of true faith, while "the West and its divides" are anathematized. The resurrection of dead fathers by their sons leads Fyodorov to a total denial of the Christian dogma of individual salvation in favor of common salvation through "paternal love." An ancestor cult enforced by a military state is his ideal of the future and a precondition for this "resurrection of the fathers."[75]

There is no dispute among Sharov's critics that he reads Russian messianism through the prism of Fyodorov's philosophy.[76] The disagreement begins around the question of whether Sharov was an advocate of this philosophy or its sarcastic critic. The fact that Fyodorov's followers burned Sharov in effigy in front of the writer's apartment is regarded as proof that Sharov did indeed parody Fyodorov's philosophy.[77] Yet Boris Belkin believes that Sharov had a soft spot for Fyodorov's ideas precisely because the latter's teaching was instrumental in explaining the role that Sharov's ancestors had played in perpetrating terror:

> Frankly speaking, I think that Vladimir Sharov himself, for all his antagonism toward the totalitarian nature of Fyodorov's *Philosophy of the Common Cause* [or *Task* – D.Kh.], did not (thus emulating many others, including famous, intelligent, and profound people) escape its savage charm; it so very aptly, if one may put it thus, superimposed itself upon Vladimir Sharov's attitude toward his own father and toward the fate of his grandmother and grandfather, who were gunned down.[78]

Shishkin also points out Sharov's obsession with resurrecting the dead: there is even an entire Sharov novel *Before and During* (1993) dedicated to this issue.[79] In his journalistic articles, Sharov tells readers that Fyodorov's philosophy has "an infinitude of intuitions, foresight and clairvoyance," and calls Fyodorov a person who embodies "saintly living and the purest intentions."[80] In another article, having discussed Fyodorov's misogynistic request to eschew reproduction and sexual relations with women, who only "take mankind farther away from God,"[81] he lauds Fyodorov in even more unambiguous terms:

> Fyodorov offers one of those ideas of genius that unite God and earthly human life. [His philosophy] freed a sea of energy and created an incredible enthusiasm that the country lived by and fed on for almost the entire following century. Fyodorov is a magical key that helps one understand the life that Russia has lived and the destiny that it will follow. His *Philosophy of the Common Cause* is probably the most complete and precise expression of the

> entire complex of Russia's understanding of herself, her history, the paths she should follow, and, most importantly, of her predestination and the mission that she should pursue.[82]

Another influence on Sharov, which is too significant and obvious to his critics to be dismissed as irony or parody, is that of famous Soviet writer Andrei Platonov (1899–1951).[83] "I must say," Sharov wrote, "that I have long looked at the entire first half of the Russian twentieth century through Platonov, and I understand it in large part thanks to him."[84] Platonov was an ardent supporter of Bolshevism. The totalitarian unity of humanity, "one goal, and one meaning, and one way,"[85] had appealed to Platonov from the outset of the Bolshevik takeover. He expressed his support for Bolshevism and its terror in some powerful political publications. In the article "On Our Religion" (1920), he holds that "hatred is the soul of the revolution."[86] And revolutionary terror is apparently the only way to achieve Christ's kingdom. Platonov cedes nothing to Sharov's protagonists in his praise of terror in his "Christ and Us" (1920):

> With lead, machine guns, and cannons we sweep the violent and the traders from the temple of life. Neither obedience nor dreamy joy and hopeful prayers will change the world, will bring the kingdom of Christ closer, but fiery anger, rebellion, a burning longing for the impossibility of love will. There is evil here, but this evil is so great that it transgresses its bounds and passes over into love – the love, the one life-creating force of which Christ spoke all his life and for which he went to the cross.[87]

Not his protagonists, but Platonov himself instructs his Bolshevik audience:

> We must destroy the actual and create something that does not exist now. We must hate more to find the way to love.[88]

Like the post-Soviet admirers of terror, Platonov is asserting that hatred and terror are the only true ways of love.

Fyodorov's influence is also obvious in Platonov's prose. Platonov wants to do away with gender and sexual love for the sake of immortality.[89] Like Fyodorov before him and Sharov's protagonists after, Platonov's prose endorses the belief in the resurrection of the dead by science. Death is to be destroyed by the nonhuman "proletariat" of the future, because "through war, death, and terror lies man's road to immortality, the road to a merging with eternity."[90] Platonov wants to kill "that ancient, powerless, decrepit, suffering man and give birth, here on earth, to a new being of unprecedented strength" – a statement with clear Nietzschean overtones (Nietzsche was extremely popular in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century). This *Übermensch* will then achieve immortality and transform humanity into "a single, all-powerful, radiant being."[91] The final fire of the Apocalypse is to purify the world and create immortality through hatred and revenge.[92]

Sharov's apparent appreciation of Andrei Platonov's ideas produces another bridge that narrows the distance between his romanticization of terror and that embraced by the Russian far right, despite their animosity to Bolshevism and the communist ideology. For Platonov the Bolshevik, as for Dugin and others on the far right, hatred and terror are the true engines of social change:

> Mankind was only a little more valuable than any plant family, for in it too, the whole essence of culture was reduced to the production of two sex cells. […] Work-as-love began with the folded warmth of two bodies, […] and will end with a rebuilt universe, where the concepts of work, resistance, matter, man, etc., will certainly not exist.[93]

Such apocalyptic oracularity makes Platonov a true forerunner of the contemporary Russian far right's common end-times outlook (as we will discuss in the Conclusion): this imperfect world is to be destroyed to ensure the resurrection of the beautiful, "emerald," innocent, primordial world as it existed prior to becoming corrupted.[94]

The notion of imperfect humankind's annihilation in an apocalyptic conflagration appeals especially to Dugin, who imitates Platonov's style. Dugin's admiration for Platonov apparently knows no bounds:

> For us, Platonov is our doctrine. We take it upon ourselves and intellectually justify everything, up to and including the outright genocide of the alienating classes and the rational structures. We accept as dogma the Chevengurian madness. […] The dead huddle over us, cramping and stifling us. History strangles itself with the last loathsome noose.[95]

In Sharov's novel, the kindly Galina/Electra, amanuensis for her informant father and a loving wife to her perpetrator husband, delivers the novel's conclusion, which possibly also concludes Sharov's search for the meaning of his own family's history. Grandparents and parents, perpetrators and collaborators are not to be judged for their deeds because the guilt rests not with them but with the insane *Zeitgeist*:

> It stands to reason that more than once, or even twice, my father's honesty resulted in long prison sentences and even death sentences for people he knew. For this, many curse my father still today, and they don't even want to hear about him. But it seemed to me then, and I think it now, that he is not to be scolded for the evil – the guilt lies with our insane times.[96]

This denouement must have been a welcome one in the post-Soviet political climate and cultural atmosphere. Yet here is how writer Dmitry Bykov, a stern critic of Putinism, reacted to attempts to make sense of Stalinism: "Don't try to

find logic in horrific things. There are no reasons in them, and they have no explanation. Don't seek to justify them."[97]

The strategy of rationalizing terror in Sharov's *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* follows in Littell's footsteps, by reviving not the memory of a regime's innocent victims but that of its enthusiastic and murderous promoters, to restore their worldview, their "place in the world," and "their understanding of life, of good and of evil."[98] A morbid fascination with the perpetrators (some of whom were also destroyed) may well have guided this strategy.

Postmodern Irony on Stalinism

The demanding job of adjusting Sharov's writings to the liberal political perspective fell on the shoulders of his friends, who were moved to emphasize in their posthumous appreciations that Sharov did not support "authoritarian tendencies in Russia" and "despised the post-Soviet imperial ideology."[99] Yet Sharov never criticized Putinism and made no public political statements on his own account. His friends believed this was a consequence of his family's traumatic history: "[H]e rarely spoke out publicly about current politics – that was not cowardice but knowledge for which his loved ones had paid dearly."[100]

The question of Sharov's intentions is of great interest to scholars, who have proposed several interpretations of his views on the terror. At the beginning of his career, he was reproached by critics Sergei Kostyrko and Irina Rodnianskaia for justifying the terror and deliberately creating "a new nationalistic myth."[101] In contrast, some scholars interpret his novels as an exercise in postmodern irony aimed at deconstructing the Stalinist terror "from within." While never venturing to compare Sharov with Martin Amis, who intentionally left all the interpretative work to the reader of his *Time's Arrow, or The Nature of the Offense* (1991), the postmodern approach posits that Sharov entrusts his reader with breaking down his theological explanation of the terror.[102] The justification of terror as the way of Russian communal salvation, in which countless innocent victims are to redeem Holy Russia before the coming of the Apocalypse, reveals, this argument goes, the absurd and senseless nature of terror, discloses the meaninglessness of the Stalinist repressions, and arms the reader against the absolution of that regime.[103] "Deconstruction," Lipovetsky states, "is written into Sharov's prose," as an aid to the reader in unpacking Russia's messianic myth.[104]

Other critics have proposed a different interpretation of what they also identify as Sharov's irony. Thus, the writer's friend Boris Belkin believes that Sharov uses irony not to deconstruct terror but "to soften the sharpness and drama of real-life circumstances."[105] In other words, Sharov's purpose was therapeutic, to make the state terror more bearable for its victims (and their descendants), exactly as his protagonists claim.

Not all interpretations of Sharov's prose, however, emphasize his use of irony to alert readers against terror or to help heal the wounds of the past. For Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, another of Sharov's friends, there is a discrepancy between the

writer's presumed liberal political attitudes and the treatment of terror in *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*. Authoritarian practices, Kuritsyn asserts, "do not deserve, even as a joke, to be considered in complex religious and mythological contexts," especially given the increasing use of such practices in present-day Russia. Sharov, Kuritsyn says, "has cast too many pearls in all the wrong places."[106] This, at the very least, means that Sharov has failed in his attempts to ironically neutralize the legacy of terror – if that was indeed his goal, and Kuritsyn is arguably implying that it was not.

Sharov's reflections on terror and victimhood are sometimes understood *à la lettre* by historians. Thus, Alexander Dmitriev interprets Sharov's project (which he resolutely rejects) as a search for "collective salvation and piety in the midst of darkness and death."[107] Irina Ashcheulova, on the contrary, considers Sharov's approach productive, and believes that he tried to make sense of the absurd historical reality by showing that the inhumane nature of history and revolution does not undermine the significance of sacrificial heroism. Without a hint of irony she argues that the revolutionaries may be compared to Christian saints and that Sharov regarded Bolshevism and Stalinism as a commentary on the Holy Scriptures. To support her argument, she stresses Platonov's impact on Sharov's understanding of the revolution as an attempt to create a paradise on earth.[108]

Polina Dimova, in her turn, maintains that Sharov sought explanations for the Russian revolution and Stalinism in Russian cultural history and in digging through the spiritual history of the Russian revolution.[109] Dimova also espouses the trope of "sacrificial terror," which not only equates victims and perpetrators but also views their relations in sexual terms. Replete with musings on the sexuality of terror, its erotic nature, and the unity of victim and perpetrator, Sharov's prose certainly does offer plenty of leeway for such an interpretation, as, for example, in the following passage:

> […] [T]here is terror's most profound eroticism and sexuality, because it even comes in the guise of revolution-as-woman and then there is a transformation from woman to man during intercourse – there is a unique eroticism here. And the same mystically inseparable connection of executioner and victim, the impossibility, the incompleteness of one without the other, their inseparability, their fusion and union, as in Christ, Who is both man and God.[110]

Some critics who have embraced Sharov's mysticism and invested it with a political meaning genuinely trust that Sharov advocated for the total reconciliation of Stalinism's victims and perpetrators for the purpose of their common salvation. Eduard Nadtochy, for instance, thinks that this idea possesses a healing power and should be implemented in post-Soviet memory politics. The reconciliation of the perpetrators and victims in Sharov's prose may, according to Nadtochy, help stop "the division of the historical memory into absolute good and absolute evil" and

mend the disunity of post-Soviet society, the discord between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists that is blocking the gathering of all into one "common cause."[111] From this point of view, Sharov exemplifies "the radical Christian believer looking for the salvation of victims and their perpetrators because in Russian history, victims and perpetrators tend to exchange roles all too often." For Nadtochy, Sharov's Superintendent of Immortality Station (namely, Stalin) on the phone to Lazar Kaganovich, one of the mass murderers of the Great Terror, may be read as "God speaking to His beloved Son."[112] Other post-Soviet readers might also take at face value Sharov's assertion that every one of "those who killed [in the Russian Civil War – D.Kh.] and those who perished wanted, all in their own way, the salvation of the human race."[113]

Historically, perpetrators have considered the possibility of forgiveness for their crimes absent all punishment or repentance, without even an iota of distancing irony. Pyotr Krasnov, himself a perpetrator of the White Terror during the Russian Civil War, addresses this reconciliation (which he envisions as the only road to Russia's national salvation) in all seriousness in his *Behind the Thistle*. Dmitry Dudko, an ardent Stalinist, believed that the Stalinist perpetrator who tortured him improved his personality, and he even wanted them to meet after his release from jail.[114]

Writing his novels in the context of the triumphant post-Soviet memory of the perpetrators, itself a result of the Kremlin's memory politics, could Sharov have failed to see that naïve readers might take this portion of his discourse at face value?

Regardless of whether this was Sharov's intention or not, the impossibility of distinguishing between good and evil, between victims and perpetrators in his prose comports well with the Kremlin's memory politics and resonates with a considerable segment of the post-Soviet public. Russia has never convicted the perpetrators of mass crimes but did, for a while, have a Day of Accord and Reconciliation.[115]

Sharov objected to being presented as a postmodernist, declaring: "When I write, I believe in what I am writing about."[116] He proclaimed that he knew the true meaning of history, which he delivered through his prose; distancing his "prophetic" prose from postmodern irony was clearly important to his self-representation. Nor did he welcome any application of the concept of the grotesque to his prose.[117] This understanding of his mission clarifies why Sharov cherished his identity as a historian and why some of his friends have been adamant that he was "scrupulous" in citing historical facts.[118] He equipped his phantasmagorical novels with real historical details and even made one of *The Kingdom of Agamemnon*'s protagonists, who serves as his mouthpiece, a historian.

Sharov's distorted representations of Stalinism and the Russian revolution caused his creative work to be dubbed an alternative, or parallel, history.[119] But Sharov protested attempts to label his prose that way, called them "rubbish," and insisted on being regarded as a realist:[120] "I have always written honestly,

never distorted the layer of life that is important to me. I consider myself a realist."[121] His friends, though, sensed in his novels a willingness to recast the heinous past in harmony with a profound "sense of all creation," based on "love and faith in a miracle." Shishkin, for example, proposes the following reading of Sharov's prose:

> The meaning was in accordance not with external reality, but with the essence of all creation. That is how your prose lives. The doctor is there to save people, not to kill them. The authorities, the police, the secret services are there to keep us safe. We go to the Promised Land, not back to Egypt. The essence of all creation lies in love and in faith in a miracle.[122]

Shishkin here reveals how, "in accordance [...] with the essence of all creation," terror may acquire a positive meaning. In other words, Sharov's prose offers a strategy for "working through the past" Russian-style, which consists in the cultivation of the memory of the perpetrators. Not by chance are his texts filled with affirmations of the Soviet regime's goodwill:

> The new power structure did not simply come to rob. It also dreams of the spirit's triumph over the flesh, meaning that it is akin to Christianity. Even if incorrectly understood, it is from there; it grows from the selfsame root.[123]

Sharov describes the emotions of the perpetrators and bystanders as "a priceless feeling of joy, the richness of life, and justice":

> It came from the sense of righteousness it brought back into Russian life, from the belief that we were going where we were supposed to go. It was an invaluable feeling, and no one was prepared to give it up. People were ready to accept any number of victims, any number of innocent people being killed alongside them, and they joyfully agreed to know and to hear nothing about it, just so as not to lose that feeling again. In the end, no one prevented them from resurrecting the dead very soon, when communism was built.[124]

His postmodern reading of Sharov notwithstanding, Lipovetsky states that Sharov considered this "paradoxical feeling of righteousness to be the most treasured aspect of the revolution."[125] But contrary to the logic of postmodern irony and parody of terror,[126] this feeling is only "priceless" to those who try to exculpate the perpetrators and reconcile with the victims without punishment and repentance, precisely as happened in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet regime.

Sharov's concept of Russian terror is rooted in his theory of the oprichnina, which he perceived through a specific theosophic doctrine that regards the victims of the terror as sacrificial lambs and the perpetrators as the "high priests" of Russia's sacral history. It derives from Ivan the Terrible's self-representation

and replicates his justification of terror. The "secret knowledge" that the perpetrators will be acquitted because their crimes are part of a spiritual mystery is crucial to the functioning of post-Soviet mobmemory. Sharov's attempts to apprehend his family's past may have influenced his choice of the oprichnina as the subject of his history thesis back in the 1980s (when studying Stalinism outside the official Soviet dogma was impossible). The oprichnina probably offered Sharov a way to endow Stalinism with a profound historical perspective, allowing him to invest both medieval and communist terror with mystical meaning. As we have seen, Sharov's prose can be readily understood as the historicization and justification of terror in post-Soviet Russia, a country on a path from authoritarianism to totalitarianism.

Sharov's re-enactment of Stalinism in his fiction – often sexualized, graphic, and brimming with puzzling absurdities – fits comfortably within both the memory of the perpetrators and the expressions of the cult of death in post-Soviet popular culture.[127] It creates an "entertaining" distraction by bringing together disjointed fragments of a bloody past. Sharov's writings make the real history of the Soviet mass crimes seem as surreal and unbelievable to its heirs as the coitus between Madame de Staël and Stalin in the novel *Before and During* (1993). In a single narrative, *The Kingdom of Agamemnon* synthesizes a customized post-Soviet mobmemory at the intersection of neomedievalism and re-Stalinization, and imbues state terror with a hidden, religious meaning in the eyes of post-Soviet Russians.

A Parody on Romancing Stalinism: Dmitry Bykov's *Justification*

Written when re-Stalinization as a state-sponsored memory politics was in its early stages, Dmitry Bykov's novel *Justification* (2001) offers a strategy for dealing with terror that differs significantly from Sharov's interpretation of Stalinism, which the latter first voiced in his *Before and During*.[128] *Justification*'s plot revolves around a family story that takes place in Moscow during the Great Terror. Slava Rogov, the grandson of a scholar murdered in the Stalinist terror, is fascinated by Soviet history and his grandfather's fate.[129] Influenced by his neighbor Kretov, a camp survivor and devoted Stalinist, Slava comes to believe that Stalin wanted to use the mechanism of repressions to select the best people, those who would survive all the horrors of NKVD torture without betraying the guiltless. Stalin strove to create "a new type of human being" (actually, the official Communist Party formula for moral subjects of a new kind – "the Soviet person," lately aptly termed *Homo sovieticus*). Slava becomes a historian specializing in Stalinism and thus continues his search for information on his grandfather's past. The author hints that this quest eventually drives Slava insane. He travels to Siberia in hopes of finding Pure [Chisty], a secret camp that Stalin allegedly earmarked for the survivors and their descendants, where that pristine society would be built.[130] He comes across a sectarian settlement that he mistakes for Pure. But he quickly sees that the life there is indistinguishable from that in a camp, being structured around endless tortures

and meaningless suffering. After realizing his mistake, Slava breaks free from the sect to continue his search for Pure and drowns in the marshy taiga.

The reader learns about Stalinism partly from the plot's presentation of the 1930s but mainly from how the protagonist, Slava, envisions it. Since childhood, Slava has enjoyed imagining his country ruled in an orderly way. The USSR makes him think of a well-run railroad, instilling in him a feeling of confidence and security. Slava knows about the atrocities, tortures, and humiliations of Stalinism, but this does not conflict with his romanticized vision of Soviet history:

> In the mysterious and festive Soviet history, which in his [Kretov's – D.Kh.] account resembled a dense, frosty night with garlands of lights, fear had no place – or, rather, it was a child's Christmas fear that had nothing to do with the gray horror of the queues.[131]

Against the vivid image of that epoch, full of true feelings, bright colors, coursing blood, and his grandparents' heroic deeds, is set Slava's pale reality of the late Brezhnev era, as pointless and dull as its endless grocery-store lines. Predictably, he feels frustrated, denied the mysterious, chiseled beauty of the past. And this frustration leads him to his quest for the pure society, his journey to Siberia, and his death.

The search for a pure world reinforces the romantic image of Stalinism and admiration for Stalin, "an undeniably great soul." Yet in the novel, Stalin is never called by name. He is referred to as the Supreme Commander (*Verkhovnyi*), while his name remains unspoken, like the sacred name of God. Another motive that drives Slava's search for his grandfather's camp is his quest for the Supreme Commander's inspection (*proverka*), which seems to him necessary to a stable and true quality of life. The Stalinist society had it, but its secret has since been lost, and without the Supreme Commander's inspection one is left with only the dilapidated buildings, permissiveness, and irresponsibility of the late Soviet epoch. In other words, socialism and/or Russia can successfully function only under terror. Slava himself dreams of becoming a subject to such an inspection, following in his grandfather's footsteps:

> He himself secretly dreamed of a Supreme Commander's inspection; without it, all kindliness seemed to him incomplete and inauthentic. And he didn't like kindliness. More often than not, it was limited, assertive, and aggressive. He valued not kindliness but reliability, soundness. […] Kindliness indulged a person and weakened him to the point of being in the unbearable state in which the world around Rogov now found itself – a world of irresponsibility, lackadaisicalness, and crumbling buildings.[132]

Slava's aesthetic admiration for Stalinism finds its counterpart in the sadistic voyeurism of a man serenely gazing on atrocities and tortures. To him, torture is part of the essence of life:

> Why bother having fun, quarreling, loving, when the ultimate expression of life, its most abundant form, was execution, the combination of a latent eroticism and compliance with a complex law and a sense of justice and an element of educational entertainment for the observer? What was more interesting than executions, what more ultimate than that could the human brain devise, and what else was there for people to do whose parents had left the world?[133]

The collaboration between victims and perpetrators for "a common purpose" and "the common good" during the show trials of the 1930s (as described by many, including Arthur Koestler in his *Darkness at Noon* [1940]) did indeed play a role in legitimizing the repressions. For Slava, the appeal of Stalinism comes from the sense that it represents the essential reality of being and the essential history, in which the brutal tortures and "festive" scenarios of the Soviet past are not mutually exclusive but complementary.

Kretov, Slava's neighbor, explains to him that the repressions were not arbitrary at all: behind them lay a brilliant but secret rationale of creating a perfect society. This rationalization of the repressions reinforces the overall impression of Stalinism's mysterious beauty; its atrocities are woven into a powerful fabric of prowess and renown. When Slava's grandmother, as a young woman, thinks about the underlying logic of repressions, which will kill her husband and drive her mad, she reasons in terms not of statistics but of harmony. The purges are needed to cheer society up, in an interplay that she compares to a composition of warm and cold colors.[134] From Slava's point of view, torture alone can reveal the truth and the substance of Soviet life in the Supreme Commander's grand design, "while the rest of life can only hide it from sight." The true meaning of life, according to Slava, is to cause and experience pain – the "pain of refined agony," "pain-as-catharsis," "uplifting pain."[135] As in Sharov's prose, torture here stands at the center of Stalinism and expresses, through this "metaphysics of catharsis," the "essence of existence." However, Bykov, unlike Sharov, openly satirizes these ideas:

> Only under torture was the truth revealed; everything else obscured it. […] The meaning of life was […] in inflicting and experiencing pain, senseless and useless, now oppressing, now uplifting the soul. Pain had pride of place, not the dull pain of the beaten animal, but the high metaphysics of punishment before which all are equal – the pain of exquisite torment, pain-as-catharsis, pain-as-relief! This truly superhuman conception had only one flaw. It was too elevated; but one day all will grow into it.[136]

Slava's understanding of human suffering directly confronts the far-right exaltation of terror and Dugin's thirst for harrowing initiation rituals.

Justification lays bare the aesthetic appeal of Stalinism in post-Soviet culture and the heroization and aestheticization of terror. It helps explain why

Stalinism and the oprichnina have been romanticized, thus illuminating the origins of neomedieval memory politics in contemporary Russia:

> And though the nightly, excruciating, bodily fear of pain and the constant discomfort intimated to him that such a life was not for him, he clearly understood that his dream, the dream of a just world where people cared not just about stuffing their faces, was realized here. Without any art, without any silver lining whatsoever, admittedly – but all the art had gone into the tortures, and wasn't torture a concentrated expression of the same literature that Rogov had once been naïve enough to love? […] What does literature do? It transmits someone else's experience, oftener than not the experience of pain. Torture transmitted the same experience, making one feel like a medieval sorcerer, a Soviet partisan. If somewhere in the world there still existed an intense life with concentrated, unbearably condensed love, fear, and hope, it was here, at Pure, and only the descendants of the Supreme Commander's beloved protégés could have come up with such a thing. And from here emanated the physically tangible solidity of existence in the films of the thirties and in the music of, say, the forties.[137]

The mixed message of Bykov's novel reflected the spirit of the 1990s and early 2000s. While condemning Stalinism and terror, it asserts that the historical memory of Stalinism is meaningless in two senses. First, since Stalinism was no more than a criminal and bestial absurdity, it needs no further explanation; this history cannot be written because of its irrational nature. By driving Rogov, who wants to write about it, to insanity, the author is indicating that attempts to make sense of it lead nowhere and that those who, like Slava, remain under its spell and cannot break away from it have no place in life. Second, everything that Slava has learned and intuited about his family's past and the Soviet past in general – from his nightmares, from his strange hallucinations, from written Soviet history, from his neighbor's having survived the camps – turns out to be completely bogus. Bykov even concludes by explaining that all the "evidence" Slava has collected about his grandfather's past is irrelevant. In other words, Soviet representations of Stalinism are a sheer delusion. One way to read the novel's message is that the horrors of Stalinist terror cannot be communicated through historical or literary narratives.

Sharov's protagonists convey, in the spirit of mature Putinism, the quasi-religious significance of sacrificial Stalinism and the oprichnina, embedding the triumphant memory of the perpetrators in the post-Soviet mobmemory. In contrast, by ultimately drowning his protagonist in the Siberian mud for his attempts to rationalize terror, Bykov takes an unequivocal stand against the romanticization of Stalinism. In *Justification*, religion is not a way of rationalizing terror but a means of demonstrating the absurdity of religious fanaticism and its attendant atrocities. Bykov had observed sectarian life firsthand during a journalistic assignment, and recoiled from it with horror and disgust, denying it

any positive meaning. Unlike Sharov, he demystifies the sectarian ideology, although the emphasis that both novels lay on Orthodox sects speaks volumes about the impact of their doctrines on post-Soviet society. Bykov also differs from Sharov in demonstrating that admiration for the grandeur that was the Soviet Union is nothing less than an expression of imperial ambitions.[138]

Justification was Bykov's way of exposing his own lingering illusions about Soviet rule. He spoke to an interviewer in highly personal terms about his novel, identifying himself with his protagonist and confessing that by drowning Slava, he was taking himself to task and warning himself against idealizing terror and falling for the seduction of the Soviet totalitarian regime:

> And so my hero, Rogov, who is trying to justify this project, to find a grain of rationality in it and thus build a logic of terror, was for me a kind of self-disclosure. That is why it's no coincidence that many critics […] wrote that Bykov and Rogov were manifestly in some sort of semantic consonance. Of course there is a direct interplay. Of course Rogov is me, but the only difference is that Rogov is insane […] and I have saved myself from going mad. And there's this key episode when the hero sees what seems to be utopia, this camp of pure people in a village called Pure, sees an unusually beautiful summer meadow, runs across that meadow and falls into a stinking, horrible bog – that was a sort of warning to myself. And in many ways, it must be said, this book was me striking a deal with myself.[139]

By exposing the inner logic of his illusions about Stalinism, Bykov gives himself, and his reader, a chance to break free from the ideology that justifies Stalinism and to resist re-Stalinization. This novel probably helped Bykov, unlike Sharov, to emerge as one of the main figures of the anti-Putin opposition. The lesson that Bykov taught himself in writing *Justification* can readily be applied to Sharov's prose:

> [O]nce you start searching for the logic behind the terror, in no time you're on terror's side. This is a very important thing, because there is, of course, no logic in terror. It was a means for the system to survive; it had no other way. Had it not constantly supported the horror, it would have perished much sooner.[140]

Notes

1 Caryl Emerson, "The Russian Revolution as fantastic synaesthetic event (Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii and Vladimir Sharov)," *Journal of European Studies*, 2020, 50/1, 36–45.
2 Vladimir Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona* (Moscow: AST, 2018).
3 Bradley Gorski proposed interpreting Sharov's prose through the prism of neomedievalism, and I concur with his approach. Bradley Gorski, "Review of Vladimir Sharov's *The Rehearsals*. Translated by Oliver Ready. Gardena: Dedalus Books,

2018," Russian Review, 2018, 77/4: 652-653. While some critics consider Sharov an elitist writer whose prose has nothing to do with popular culture, I agree with Jeffrey Brooks whose wonderful book *The Firebird and the Fox: Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), amply demonstrates the interpenetration between Russian "high" and "popular" commercial culture already in the second half of the nineteenth century.

4 Mikhail Shishkin, "Begun i korabl,'" in *Vladimir Sharov: Po tu storonu istorii*, 48–49, 45.
5 Vladimir Mirzoev, "Vse my umiraem det'mi," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 83.
6 Mark Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terror: istoricheskii metasiuzhet v romanakh Sharova," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 321.
7 Boris Sennikov, *Tambovskoye vosstaniye 1918-1921 gg. i raskrest'yanivaniye Rossii 1929–1933 gg.* (Moscow: Posev, 2004).
8 https://base.memo.ru/person/show/2650317. Viktor Vygodskii, "Chernyi spisok bortsov za svetloe budushchee," *proza.ru*, May 11, 2017. https://proza.ru/2017/05/11/1723.
9 Vladimir Sharov, "Kogda Shera v forme," in *Perekrestnoe opuylenie (vremya, mesto, liudi): Sbornik esse* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2018), 11. Kseniia Larina, "Muzeinye palaty: 'Aleksandr Sharov. Volshebniki prikhodiat k liudiam?' v Gosudarstvennom literaturnom muzee (fragment peredachi)," *Ekho Moskvy*, December 31, 2011. https://represnews.blogspot.com/2012/01/blog-post.html.
10 Sharov, "Kogda Shera v forme," 19. One narrative describes him in 1938, upon his reassignment to Rostov-on-Don, refusing to occupy the vacant apartment of a local apparatchik whose entire family had been repressed. Instead, in an act of conscience, he chose to live in an uncomfortable hotel for the remaining years of his service in Rostov. Sharov, "Kogda Shera v forme," 25.
11 *ibid*., 23–24.
12 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl,'" 44. The last sentence is in English in the original.
13 Larina, "Muzeinye palaty."
14 *ibid*.,
15 Sharov, "Kogda Shera v forme," 25.
16 Larina, "Muzeinye palaty."
17 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl,'" 45.
18 *ibid*., 44. Shishkin makes some mistakes regarding Vladimir Sharov's family story – his grandmother was arrested after Vladimir's father, Alexander Sharov, returned from the expedition, and Alexander Sharov's father survived until 1949. The newspaper mentioned here was *Izvestia*. Vladimir Sharov's father actually returned from the Arctic expedition in 1937.
19 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl'," 45.
20 Vladimir Mirzoev, "Vse my umiraem det'mi," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 83.
21 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl'," 46.
22 Natalia Igrunova, "'Ia ne chuvstvuiu sebia ni uchitelem, ni prorokom': Interv'iu s Vladimirom Sharovym," *Druzhba Narodov*, 2004, 8.
23 Ol'ga Andreeva, "'Zhizn' – eto tol'ko ispytatel'nyi srok': Pisatel' Vladimir Sharov o literature i smysle russkoi istorii," *Gorkii*, August 20, 2018.
24 Georgi Borisov, "Otkaz ot detei – rastianutoe samoubiistvo," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 671.
25 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl'," 46.
26 Jonathan Littell, *Les Bienveillantes* (Paris: Galliamard, 2006); Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
27 Jonathan Littell, "Posledniy blef Putina," *Meduza*, October 5, 2022; Jonathan Littell, "Politika umirotvoreniia Putina amoral'na," *Meduza*, April 14, 2022.
28 On the importance of medieval categories to Sharov's thought, see Emerson, "Vladimir Sharov on History, Memoir, and a Metaphysics of Ends," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 2019, 63/4: 600.
29 On the perpetrator turn, see Chapter 6.

30 Denis Peschanski, "Entre-t-on dans l'ère du bourreau?" (Claire Devarrieux and Natalie Levisalles, "'Les Bienveillantes,' roman à controverse"), *Libération*, November 7, 2006.
31 Marc Lemonier, *Les Bienveillantes décryptées: Carnet de notes* (Paris: Pré aux Clercs, 2007), 9; Grégoire Leménager, "Génération Littell," *BibliObs*, July 5, 2010.
32 See, for example, Paul-Éric Blanrue, *Les Malveillantes: Enquête sur le cas Jonathan Littell* (Paris: Scali, 2006); and Édouard Husson and Michel Terestchenko, *Les Complaisantes: Jonathan Littell et l'écriture du mal* (Paris: Guibert, 2007).
33 Tinneke Everaert, "*The Representation of Perpetrators in the Work of Martin Amis: A Comparative Analysis*" (Master's dissertation; University of Ghent, 2014), 19–21. See also Robert Eaglestone, "Avoiding Evil in Perpetrator Fiction," *Holocaust Studies*, 2011, 2–3: 17. As I argue elsewhere (Khapaeva, "Trendy Monsters," 66, 73–77), Littell's novel contributed to the formation of the perpetrator turn. The rise of "the sympathetic Nazi" as a popular protagonist in Western popular culture also correlated with the "lively intellectual engagement with perpetrators" in historiography, for example, "About: Focus and Scope," *The Journal of Perpetrator Research*. https://jpr.winchesteruniversitypress.org/about.
34 Pierre Cormary, "Les Bienveillantes de Jonathan Littell," *Le salon littéraire*, May 30, 2013.
35 Jonathan Littell and Pierre Nora, "Conversation sur l'histoire et le roman," *Le Débat*, 2007, 144: 29.
36 Cormary, "Les Bienveillantes de Jonathan Littell."
37 Michel Murat, "Faut-il brûler Les Bienveillantes?" *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine*, 2012.
38 Vladimir Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona* (Moscow: AST, 2018), 17.
39 On the claims that readers should "engage in a kinetic process" of "empathetic identification with the Holocaust Perpetrator," see, for example, Erin McGlothlin, "Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response," *Narrative*, 2016, 24/3: 271.
40 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 47.
41 Myasnikov's real memoirs about the murder of Mikhail Romanov are extensively quoted in the novel.
42 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl'," 42.
43 Mirzoev, "Vse my umiraem det'mi," 90.
44 Charlotte Lacoste, "Un cas de manipulation narrative: *Les Bienveillantes* ou comment éveiller le génocidaire qui sommeille en chacun de nous," *Université Nancy 2 / Groupe de recherche "Littérature et histoires," Paris*, 8: 10. www.revue-texto.net/docannexe/file/2133/charlotte_lacoste_les_bienveillantes.pdf.
45 Charlotte Lacoste, *Séductions du bourreau: Négation des victimes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 68, 29.
46 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 44.
47 *ibid*., 96. Vladimir Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo: chto eto takoe?" in *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik* (2003), ed. Sigurd Shmidt (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), 116–30. As we have seen, this article was a forebear of the mystical turn in the post-Soviet historiography of the oprichnina and may have played a role in encouraging it. Snychov's doctrine of tsarebozhie espouses very similar ideas.
48 Sharov, "Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo," 130.
49 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 45.
50 Caryl Emerson, "K voprosu o Sharove i L've Tolstom," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 231.
51 *ibid*., 253. Emerson points to the influence of a "secular processing" of religious, soteriological, and eschatological beliefs, which should be taken into consideration when studying secular theories and events in twentieth-century Russian history. *ibid*., 227.
52 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl'," 52.

53 Eduard Nadtochy, "Narkom nebesnykh putei soobshcheniia," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 548.
54 Dunaevskaia, "Kogda chasy ostanovilis'," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 17.
55 Mirzoev, "Vse my umiraem det'mi," 91–92.
56 Aleksandr Zhurbin, "Tol'ko odin razgovor," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 183.
57 Alexander Gavrilov, "Remont provalov," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 150.
58 Dunaevskaia, "Kogda chasy ostanovilis'," 32.
59 Although Zhestovsky does claim to be Great Prince Mikhail and joins other *samozvantsy* (royal imposters) making the rounds of Russian villages to extract donations from the peasants, the novel is certainly not focused on the phenomenon of *samozvanchestvo*, as Gerry Walsh has assumed. Walsh, "Mikrokosmografiia russkikh kul'turnykh mifov," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 646.
60 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 84. Compare Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 7.
61 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 91.
62 *ibid*., 97.
63 *ibid*., 113.
64 *ibid*., 97.
65 *ibid*., 106.
66 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 482.
67 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 108.
68 *ibid*., 110.
69 *ibid*., 112.
70 *ibid*., 45.
71 Snychov, *Samoderzhavie dukha*, 8.
72 Per-Arne Bodin, *Languages, Canonization and Holy Foolishness*, 162.
73 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 66.
74 *ibid*., 280.
75 Nikolay Fyodorov, "Zapiska ot neuchenykh k uchenym russkim, uchenym svetskim, nachataia pod vpechatleniem voiny s islamom, uzhe vedennoi (v 1877–1878 gg.), i s Zapadom – ozhidaemoi, i okanchivaemaia iubileem prep. Sergiia," *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Mysl', 1982), 95–193.
76 For Fyodorov and Platonov's influences on Sharov, see Emerson, "Vladimir Sharov on History," 598; Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terrora," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 325; and de la Fortel', "Khod konia," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 494.
77 Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terrora," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 326.
78 Boris Belkin, "Mne povezlo: O vstrechakh s Vladimirom Sharovym i ego knigami," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 121.
79 Vladimir Sharov, "Do i vo vremia," *Novyi Mir*, 1993, 3–4.
80 Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opuylenie*, 229-230. Discussing Fyodorov's philosophy, Sharov uses the plural pronoun, "us."
81 *ibid*., 263.
82 *ibid*., 263.
83 See Caryl Emerson, "'Our Own Madness, Our Own Absurd' (Andrei Platonov, Vladimir Sharov, and George Bernard Shaw," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 30, 2019.
84 Vladimir Sharov, "Ia prozhil zhizn'…," in Sharov, *Perekrestnoe opylenie (vremia, mesto, liudi): Sbornik esse* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2018), 246.
85 Platonov, "Poeziia rabochikh i krest'ian," in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Vremia, 2011), vol. 8, 14. I quote from *Krasnyi Platonov: Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Common Place, 2016), a collection of Platonov's publications of the 1920s issued by his current Russian political admirers.
86 Platonov, "O nashei religii," in *Krasnyi Platonov*, 85.
87 Platonov, "Khristos i my," *ibid*., 32.
88 Platonov, "Vserossiiskaia kolymaga," *ibid*., 215.
89 Platonov, "Kul'tura proletariata," *ibid*., 124–25.

90 Platonov, "Vechnaia zhizn'," *ibid*., 71.
91 Platonov, *ibid*., 72.
92 "Man and labor took each other over. And from that moment on, the world became doomed to destruction, and a person began to absorb all the phenomena, every tremor and change in the world, and turn it into what he wants – to strengthen, to immortalize his life. Man has condemned himself to the realm of infinity and immortality, to the realm of freedom and victory. The first outburst of anger and revenge for the accidental death of a child or wife is the beginning of immortality." Platonov, "Da sviatitsia imia tvoe," in *Krasnyi Platonov*, 52.
93 Platonov, "O kul'ture zapriazhennogo sveta i poznannogo elektrichestva," *ibid*., 246–47.
94 Platonov, "Pitomnik novogo cheloveka," *ibid*., 263. On apocalyptic themes in Platonov, see David M. Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1989).
95 To acknowledge his esteem for Platonov, Dugin even coined the term "magical Bolshevism," alluding to the "magical realism" of Western literary criticism and prefiguring the application of the word "magical" to various concepts by post-Soviet literati. Alexander Dugin, "Magicheskii bol'shevizm Andreia Platonova," in *Russkaia veshch'* (Moscow: Arktogeia, 2001). On similarities between Platonov and Dugin, see Mikhail Epstein, "Satanodizeia: religioznyi smysl russkoi istorii po Vladimiru Sharovu," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 280–82, although Epstein believes that Sharov distanced himself from that line of thought.
96 Sharov, *Tsarstvo Agamemnona*, 89.
97 Zarrina Salimova, "Dmitrii Bykov: roman 'Opravdanie' byl popytkoi razobrat'sia s imperskim kompleksom," *Nasha Gazeta*, May 29, 2019. https://nashagazeta.ch/news/les-gens-de-chez-nous/dmitriy-bykov-roman-opravdanie-byl-popytkoy-borby-s-imperskim-kompleksom.
98 "'Kazhdyi moi roman dopolniaet predydushchie…': Beseda s M. Lipovetskim," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, 2008, 3/59.
99 Mikhail Epstein claims that Sharov is all about the grotesque; he has applied the term "satanodicy" to Sharov's writings, that being similar to what Lipovetsky calls "the theology of terror." Epshtein, "Satanoditseia," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 262–66.
100 Mirzoev, "Vse my umiraem det'mi," *ibid*., 83.
101 Sergei Kostyrko and Irina Rodnianskaia, "Sor iz izby. Vokrug romana Vladimira Sharova 'Do i vo vremia,'" *Novyi Mir*, 1993, 5: 186–87, 189. On Sharov's nationalism, see Sergei Sirotin, "Religioznyi natsionalizm. Vladimir Sharov. Do i vo vremia," *noblit.ru*, July 17, 2019, http://noblit.ru/node/3638.
102 Aleksandr Gorbenko, for example, reads Sharov's prose as a deconstruction of terror and revolutionary discourse. Gorbenko "Homo conservat omnia," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 465, 466. According to Lipovetsky, Sharov offers no "apologia of Stalin," instead presenting "a parody of the Soviet theology of violence." Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terrora," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 311.
103 *ibid*., 340, 341.
104 *ibid*., 334.
105 Belkin, "Mne povezlo. O vstrechakh s Vladimirom Sharovym i ego knigami," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 121.
106 Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, "Sled v sled," *Ural*, 2019, 1. https://magazines.gorky.media/ural/2019/1/sled-v-sled-2.html.
107 Aleksandr Dmitriev, "Mezhdu dvukh Platonovykh," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 360.
108 "[T]he inhuman character of history-as-revolution […] does not negate the significance of the sacrificial deed. […] [H]ence the images of martyred revolutionaries in Russian history, who are in no way inferior to Christian saints." Irina Ashcheulova, "Avtorskaia istoriosofiia v esseistike V. Sharova," *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta: Filologiia*, 2015, 4/36: 81, 83.

109 See Polina D. Dimova, "Revoliutsiia kak kosmicheskaia misteriia: Skriabin v romane 'Do i vo vremia,'" in *Po tu storonu istorii*, especially pages 559 and 578. Sharov's widow also asserts that her late husband paid serious attention to what he considered the obvious connections between sectarians and the Bolsheviks. Dunaevskaia, "Kogda chasy ostanovilis'," 17.
110 Vladimir Sharov, *Do i vo vremia*, 244–45.
111 Nadtochy, "Narkom nebesnykh putei soobshcheniia," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 548.
112 *ibid*.
113 Vladimir Sharov, "Bud'te kak deti," *Znamia*, 2008, 1/2: 60. See also Amina Gabrielova, "Rifmy i refreny," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 613.
114 On Dmitry Dudko, see "Mikhail Dudko i Vladimir Legoida v programme 'Parsuna,'" *Foma*, October 27, 2020.
115 This holiday was celebrated on November 7, from 1996 to 2004.
116 Borisov, "Otkaz ot detei," 672. See also Vladimir Sharov, "Na chem stoim," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, 2013, 2.
117 "[Borisov] Volodia, I have already started talking about the sarcasm, the grotesque, in your novel, but at the same time there is a lot of sadness in it. [Sharov] Both are only slightly mine." Borisov, "Otkaz ot detei," 670.
118 Anna Berdichevskaia, "Prostranstvo Sharova i 'velikaia shatkost','" in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 162.
119 Dmitrii Bavil'skii, "Nishi Sharova," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 395. On Sharov's writings as alternative history ("allohistory"), see Harry Walsh, "The Micro-cosmographia of Russian Cultural Myths in Vladimir Sharov's Allohistorical Novels," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 2002, 46/3: 565–85.
120 Elena Ivanitskaia, "Absurd nashei zhizni," *Moskovskie Novosti*, 2002, 39, October 8–14; Igrunova, "Ia ne chuvstvuiu sebia ni uchitelem, ni prorokom." For an analysis of Sharov as a realist, see Caryl Emerson, "The Russian Revolution as fantastic synaesthetic event (Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii and Vladimir Sharov)," *Journal of European Studies*, 2020, 50/1: 36–45. On Sharov's respect for true history, see Klarisa Pul'son, "Kommentarii k Bytiiu. Interv'iu s Vladimirom Sharovym," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, September 18, 2014.
121 Vladimir Berezin, "Vladimir Sharov: 'Est' obraz mira, kotoryi ia khochu zapisat','" *Druzhba Narodov*, 1996, 8: 176.
122 Shishkin, "Begun i korabl'," 48.
123 Vladimir Sharov, *Voskreshenie Lazaria* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2019), 193.
124 Vladimir Sharov, *Iskushenie revoliutsiei* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2009), 48. See also Vladimir Sharov, "Pamiati proletarskoi sily," *Znamia*, 2009, 8: 163.
125 Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terrora," *Po tu storonu istorii*, 328. But even Lipovetsky is unsure on the extent to which the ideas that Sharov expressed in his essays and other writings diverge from those he personally held. There is, Lipovetsky wrote, "a flickering distance between the writer and the narrator." Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terrora," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 318.
126 Lipovetsky, "Teologiia terrora," in *Po tu storonu istorii*, 344, also 346, 348.
127 On the Russian cult of death, see the Russian translation of *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture: Zanimatel'naia smert': razvlecheniia epokhi antigumanizma*, trans. Dmitrii Uskov and Larisa Zhitkova (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2020).
128 Dmitry Bykov, *Opravdanie* (Moscow: AST, 2001).
129 The protagonist's first name, Slava, also means "Glory" in Russian, and his family name, Rogov, comes from "horn," which could be an allusion to Bykov's family name (*byk* means "bull" in Russian).
130 Bykov, *Opravdanie*, 54.
131 *ibid*., 25. Bykov is hinting here at the Soviet economy's constant deficits and shortages.
132 *ibid*., 55–56.

133 *ibid*., 107.
134 *ibid*., 9.
135 *ibid*., 112.
136 *ibid*., 110.
137 *ibid*., 111.
138 Salimova, "Dmitrii Bykov: roman 'Opravdanie.'"
139 "'Etot roman byl popytkoi razobrat'sia s moiei lubov'iu k sovetskomu proektu': Dmitrii Bykov o svoem romane 'Opravdanie.' Sto lektsii s Dmitriem Bykovym," *TV Rain*, December 16, 2017. https://tvrain.ru/lite/teleshow/sto_lektsij_s_dmitriem_bykovym/etot_roman_byl-453037/.
140 *ibid*.

CONCLUSION

The Politics of Reversed Time – Apocalypse as Practice

In this book, I have argued that political neomedievalism – the fascination with the anti-democratic aspects of the medieval past, including extreme social inequalities, infringements on personal freedom, despotic monarchy, a reign of terror, and empire-building – has become fundamental for the Putin regime's memory politics.

Its premodern claims and inspirations notwithstanding, political neomedievalism is an essentially modern phenomenon that legitimizes new forms of unfreedom rather than recreates the old ones. We do not yet know how exactly these forms will develop. But it can confidently be said that these new forms will not be medieval in any meaningful sense of the word.

Neomedievalism is not the first attempt in modern times to find a social model in the past. But it has radically distanced itself from the conception of time structured around the theory of progress and has grown on a vision of the future as the end of human civilization. The retrograde temporality embedded in the neomedieval worldview creates an illusion that history can be repeated and re-enacted. No surprise, then, that apocalyptic fantasies typify far-right discourses on both sides of the Russia/West divide. They belong to the same type of historical imagination, imitating the omnipresence of apocalyptic themes in medieval culture. If in the West neomedievalism dwells in the domain of the imagination, in Russia it has become an integral part of state politics.

Despite its particularities, such as the development of this memory politics alongside re-Stalinization with its cult of the victory in World War II, post-Soviet Russia provides clues to an understanding of the global fascination with "all things medieval" that I consider an expression of the current crisis of the future and the decay of liberal democracy. Political neomedievalism advances pre-modern forms of social and political organization as a valuable cultural legacy. It also contributes to the rise of anti-humanism, a prominent trend in today's

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culture that expresses a profound disillusionment with humans. Along with social movements that disregard anthropocentrism and position human extinction as their goal, the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of commodified anti-humanism. By presenting the end of the world as a desirable future, anti-humanism assists neomedievalism in promoting the apocalypse as history's teleological destination.

Putinism and the Social Apocalypse

Putinism is a regime of a new type.[1] The projection into it of the old models – such as fascism or Soviet communism – may only undermine our understanding. Putinism lacks the socialist aspects of the Soviet regime, its egalitarian dogmas, patriarchal state, and future-oriented ideology. The reconstruction of the empire and a return to the medieval past are the only projects that the Kremlin has for Russians.

Scholars disagree on whether Putinism is a form of fascism.[2] There are undeniable similarities between them, including the leader cult, the veneration of force, aggressive foreign politics, government by terror, gnostic beliefs, and nostalgia for the Middle Ages. Some of the Kremlin's ideologists harbor, as we have seen, an undisguised respect for fascism. The desire to call Putinism fascism is of course understandable, since the supporters of this view want Putinism to be recognized as a criminal regime.

While it is hard to disagree that Putinism is a criminal regime, fascism is not the only criminal regime in history. ISIS presents a contemporary example, and there are even certain commonalities between Putinism and ISIS. For example, the far-right's enthusiasm for the adoption of the patriarchal *Domostroy* in dictating the norms of everyday life has found legal implementation in Russia, where in 2017 Putin signed into law an amendment that decriminalizes certain forms of domestic violence. The increasing role of "political Orthodoxy" in public life and repressions against the LGBT community is another similarity. The Wagner Group, a product of Putinism, probably attempted to imitate ISIS by releasing an "unverified video" in which the execution of a "traitor," prisoner Evgeny Nuzhin, whose head is smashed with a sledgehammer, is eerily reminiscent of public executions by chainsaw staged by ISIS.[3]

But there are features that distinguish Putinism from fascism. For all its medieval nostalgia, fascism had a modernist component and offered a project for the future, and it strove, as did communism, to create a society of a new kind, however monstrous it was to be. National Socialism had a socialist component: its racist theory promised a pan-German commonwealth, achieved through world conquest, the annihilation of the Jewish and Roma people, and the enslavement of Slavs. Most fascists were self-confessed atheists and cultivated no religious messianism. Mussolini may have had to maintain good relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, but the "Thousand-Year Reich" came with no messianistic trappings. In contrast, Orthodox messianism is

important to the Kremlin, and the Russian Orthodox Church and its sects play a crucial role in its memory politics.

Even less is Putinism a repetition of the Middle Ages or a return to a medieval social organization. Whether political neomedievalism is merely the Kremlin's instrument, used to manipulate the public, or the Kremlin's ideologists sincerely believe in their own propaganda and wish to return to medieval Rus, that would not mean that Russia is "going medieval." The medieval allusions so dominant in Russian parlance conceal rather than clarify the inner workings of post-Soviet society. They routinely replace an analysis of post-Soviet realities with the idea that "the Middle Ages are coming back."

Putinism is not defined by stirring connotations of medieval knights in shining armor or the feudal "society of orders," although these uplifting medieval metaphors do appeal to Putin's cronies. As I have argued elsewhere, Putinism is, rather, a society in *dis*order.[4] A complex modern society is run by the Putin clique, which represents a mingling of the FSB with organized crime and controls most state operations as its private domain. Putinism is a regime that lacks any functional legal system to protect ordinary people against violence meted out by the authorities.

The perverted memory of terror constitutes the most important continuity between the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. Never fully processed and understood as crimes, these instances of terror are reconfiguring themselves in Russian daily life. Instrumentalized by Putinism, the historical memory of the *zona* – the Soviet and post-Soviet camp and prison system – informs the post-Soviet mobmemory and feeds into the memory of the perpetrators.

Unlike the Nazi camps, which existed, along with Nazism itself, for a limited number of years, the Soviet camps emerged together with the Bolshevik regime. Renamed "colonies," they exist to this day. Over the seventy years of Soviet rule, millions of people passed through them, as either inmates or warders. The zona was an organic feature of Soviet socialism (even after the GULAG was officially dismantled) and an integral experience for generations of Soviet and post-Soviet people. As Khlevniuk points out, "The [camp] culture, carried by the millions of former prisoners and guards, was disseminated throughout the country and affected the entire Soviet society."[5] The camps accurately reflected the features of the society that had engendered it: "[T]he same slovenly working practices, the same criminally stupid bureaucracy, the same corruption, the same sullen disregard for human life."[6] Not by chance did inmates call the Soviet world outside the camps "the big zona."

From the inception of the GULAG, Bolshevik policy was to put political prisoners together with hardened criminals, a practice that remains current in post-Soviet Russia. Criminals were considered social proxies by the Soviet regime, perhaps not least because the Bolsheviks themselves had emerged as a semi-criminal organization that partly financed itself through "expropriation of the expropriators" (armed robbery, in simple terms). Intimate links with the criminal world, rule by terror, and aggressive imperialism are the main features that Putinism shares with the Bolsheviks and the Soviets.

In the Soviet camps, career criminals, sentenced to a time-limited "re-education," were allowed to impose their criminal norms on the rest of the prisoners, thus helping the warders run the GULAG system. Political prisoners occupied the lowest rung of this caste society. Varlam Shalamov has left this memorable description:

> [I]n that hell, only career criminals live relatively well: they are held in high regard and even the almighty bosses are wary of them. They are always well fed, well dressed, and they support each other. […] An intellectual prisoner is crushed by the camp. Everything that was dear to him is trampled to dust; civilization, and culture fly away from him in the shortest possible time, which is counted in weeks. A reasoned argument is made by a fist, a stick; compulsion comes by way of a rifle butt or a punch to the jaw.[7]

During the "Soviet century," as Moshe Levin aptly called it, the Soviet zona generated its own norms for human relations, guided entirely by sadism and the cult of force. And even after the collapse of communism, the post-Soviet prisons have adeptly preserved the spirit of the terror-riddled Soviet system. Many prisons and camps have remained operational in the same locations, with no interruptions and certainly no improvements, as Anne Applebaum described in her renowned monograph on the GULAG.[8]

Under Putin's rule, the zona has transitioned into the prevailing matrix of social relations, normalizing a quasi-caste social organization. Analyzing the similarities between the zona, with its mafia-like social organization, and early-feudal tribal structures, Lev Klein, a famous archaeologist who described his experiences as a prisoner of conscience in 1980 and 1981, concludes: "The camp society of thieves […] had a tremendous impact on the entire culture of our country."[9] The political repressions inflicted by Putin's regime, which is sliding precipitously into totalitarianism, have reanimated long-standing traditions of state violence. The engineered post-Soviet mobmemory supports and facilitates this social degeneration. In 2006, when this social and cultural system was in its nascent stage, I termed it *Gothic society*. [10]

The scale of post-Soviet inequalities is tellingly reminiscent of the utopian and dystopian fiction and neomedieval pamphlets explored in this book. Russia's opposition media, political analysts, and researchers concur that Russia is run by a few families within Putin's inner circle, in a mafia-style organization that results in extreme wealth inequality.[11] Although the lack of any reliable statistics makes it very hard to speculate about the post-Soviet social structure, media accounts do offer some information on emerging practices and social relations. According to some estimates, from 1% to 3% of the population possesses most of the country's wealth (compared to 42% in the US).[12]

The increase of inequalities and the rise of dictatorship, which have betrayed commonly cherished expectations regarding the post-communist transition to democracy, prompt the use of medieval terminology in Russian parlance.

However, once again, this does not mean that the Middle Ages have returned to Russia. In fact, the application of medieval concepts to post-Soviet realities only historicizes and normalizes increasing social inequalities, Putin's autocracy, and political repressions. For example, the term "estate" (*soslovie*), now used in official documents and procedures, reflects how seriously Putinism takes political neomedievalism as a way of legitimizing social inequalities and injustice. In several lawsuits reported by the Russian media, the police has been presented as a "social group" or "an estate."[13] Putin has called Russia's businessmen "an estate,"[14] and former FSB Director Nikolay Patrushev, currently Secretary of the Security Council, called his *chekists* (FSB officers) "the new nobility."[15] The conflicts over the respective privileges of Russia's FSB, police, and army that before the war were covered – albeit fragmentarily – by the Russian news media, were at that time eloquently described as a struggle among "social orders."[16] As the newspaper *Vedomosti* puts it: "The formation of distinct castes within the ruling class and its segregation from the rest of the population is bringing Russia back to the feudal and Soviet ways."[17]

Obviously, Putin's cronies prefer to think of themselves as feudal lords rather than as ordinary criminals. Government officials seem to enjoy calling themselves "the seigneur's people" (*liudi gosudarevy*), and the appeal of this neomedieval self-definition by the elite has found a counterpart in the medieval word *kholop*, a self-characterization now used by ordinary people. The colloquial use of this word expresses, on one hand, the sense of social injustice and lack of legal protection that loudly reverberates in post-Soviet social realities. And on the other, it testifies to the societal acceptability of disrespect toward those who are thought of as inhabiting the lower reaches of the social hierarchy. As we have seen in Chapter 5, Russian attitudes to slavery have undergone a significant transformation, from considering slavery and serfdom social evils to tolerance and even approval of them.

Putinism has produced a new social system that relies on new forms of social inequality, among which modern slavery plays an important role. Modern slavery penetrates many aspects of post-Soviet life and impacts the entire society. Russia remains among the few countries that have never signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which came into effect on February 1, 2008.[18] According to the Global Slavery Index, around one million people in Russia are enslaved by forced labor and sexual servitude.[19] Russian slaves – mainly but not exclusively women and children – are sold in more than fifty countries for sexual exploitation and slave labor. Judging from the scandalous cases that made it into the media before the crackdown on the freedom of expression became especially stringent in 2019, slave labor is not only prevalent in agriculture and construction but penetrates almost all spheres of the Russian economy.[20] To give just one example: in the provincial city of Tula, famous especially for its Lev Tolstoy Museum at Yasnaya Polyana, Russian citizens were forced to work under slavelike conditions in municipal hospitals.[21]

Forced unpaid labor is routine in the Russian army, which is still largely manned by conscription. The Russian media used to report quite often on instances where soldiers were exploited by their officers, including being forced to build country houses for superiors, do manual labor of all kinds, and work as house servants (virtually serfs).[22] This practice, which dates back to the Soviet army and even further, may actually be glossed in Putin's media as establishing positive, "patriarchal" family relations between soldiers and their commanders.

Prison is another enclave of forced labor in the Russian Federation. Every year, prisoners earn billions of rubles for the system.[23] In 2019, a new amendment to the Penal Code adopted by the State Duma legalized the use of inmate labor in private enterprises and on federal construction sites,[24] de facto sanctioning the same kind of slave labor as in the Stalinist camps, where it was a common practice.[25] In 2021, the pandemic prompted the Russian authorities to consider using inmate labor on major construction projects such as the Trans-Siberian railway.[26]

High-ranking Russian officials do not shy away from voicing their public approval of slavery. Valery Zorkin, chair of the Constitutional Council, wrote in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the official newspaper of the Russian government, that serfdom had helped hold pre-revolutionary Russian society together and waxed nostalgic for that form of social organization:

> For all serfdom's flaws, it was the main tie supporting the nation's inner unity. It is not coincidental that, as historians attest, peasants used to tell their former lords and masters after the reform [the abolition of serfdom – D.Kh.], "We were yours, and you were ours." The most important line of social tension, that between the power structure and the peasant masses, had therefore been deprived of a crucial buffer in the person of the landlords. And that was one of the substantial causes of the increase in peasant uprisings and then in organized revolutionary processes in Russia as the nineteenth century became the twentieth.[27]

While Zorkin's statements outraged the liberal press, they affected neither his position nor his reputation in the Kremlin: at the time of writing, he was still chairing the Constitutional Council of the Russian Federation.

Slavery is closely linked to Russian imperial ambitions. The Russian far right assumes that the lower estates or castes will be made up of immigrants from former Soviet republics – Tajiks and Bashkirs – as well as migrants from North Korea and China. In 2011, for example, North Korea increased the number of Koreans sent to work in Russia, who were obliged to "repay" up to 70% of their monthly salary (around $100) into the North Korean budget.[28] Their living conditions were similar to that of Soviet labor camp inmates.[29] Today, the world witnesses Ukrainian civilians, adults and children alike, being forcibly relocated to Russia, with their passports destroyed and their basic rights

flouted. There is little hope that they will be better protected from modern slavery in Russia than ordinary Russians are.

Seen against Russia's current realities, which have only been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, the far right's social projects now look more like timely proposals to legalize and expand these inequalities under a label of the "return to medieval Rus" than deranged delusions.

Modern slavery is no more a sign of the return of the Middle Ages than it is a reflection of the social conditions of Ancient Rome or seventeenth-century North America. But it does demonstrate that certain types of society – such as Putin's Russia – sponsor the ultimate forms of social injustice and egregious exploitation. It does not make Putinism medieval, but it does show its inhumane nature.

Apocalypse as Practice

The sunset of civil rights and even basic human rights in Russia is closely related to the post-Soviet understanding of history. Eschatological expectations, an essential part of the neomedieval mentality, provide a broader context for Putin's and the Kremlin's increasingly frequent doomsday rhetoric, which combines pragmatic threats of a nuclear Armageddon with religious allusions.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Putin has been consistently threatening the world with nuclear annihilation.[30] This nuclear blackmail is not, however, a result of the Russian army's dramatic failures in the field: it has long been an imperative part of his political agenda. A new military doctrine containing an implicit nuclear threat for the West was laid out in 2000, Putin's first year as president. In 2010, during the presidency of Putin's placeholder Dmitry Medvedev, that threat was made explicit, with the declaration that nuclear weapons could be used for "defense" in response to "a threat to the existence of the Russian state."

In the 2010s, Putin said more about "a nuclear Apocalypse" than any Western leader did, causing some to speculate that his intent even then was to threaten NATO and the United States.[31] On those occasions, Putin usually placed the blame for any catastrophic outcome on the West, framing Russia's hypothetical use of nuclear weapons as revenge or retaliation. Interviewed by Oliver Stone in June 2017, Putin said that no one would survive a war between Russia and the US. Asked if there was still hope that such an outcome could be avoided, he responded using a folksy Russian saying: "There is always hope until we are carried to the cemetery in white socks."[32] In March 2018, during his presidential address to the Federal Assembly, Putin criticized "those who in the last fifteen years have tried to accelerate an arms race and seek unilateral advantage against Russia." He blamed the West for introducing "illegal" restrictions and sanctions for the annexation of Crimea that aimed at "restraining" Russia's development, including that of its military. Putin declared that they should "stop rocking the boat we are all in that is called the Earth."[33] Then came the threat: after showing several videos of new missiles, Putin said that "any nuclear attack against Russia

or its allies" would bring "immediate" retaliation, "with all the attendant consequences." Days later, he reiterated that stance, implying that nuclear war – a "disaster for the entire world" – would be a response to a significant attack against Russia: "[A]s a citizen of Russia and the head of the Russian state, I must ask myself: Why would we want a world without Russia?"[34]

In June 2018, Putin further underscored the nuclear threat, emphasizing again that "no one would survive" a war between Russia and the US.[35] At an October 2018 meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin's rhetoric became even more dramatic, with his pronouncements that "Russians would be the victims" and "the aggressor should know that revenge is inevitable, that he will be annihilated."[36] While nuclear war would be a "worldwide catastrophe," he said, at least Russians would "go to paradise as martyrs," whereas, "without the time to repent," the aggressors "would just croak." Prokhanov, who considers Putin a messiah, described the feelings he brought away from that discussion. He declared that, with "the possibility of nuclear war" seeming to "preoccupy the minds of world rulers," many participants of the Valdai Discussion Club "on their return home, opened their Gospels and re-read *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*."[37] At the end of 2018, Putin announced that Russia had completed the final testing of Avangard, an "invincible" new hypersonic nuclear-capable missile, giving it the macabre label of "a wonderful, excellent gift to our country for the New Year."[38] (This belief in "invincible" missiles – Avangard, Kinzhal, Tsirkon, etc. – like many other strategies of Putin's, finds a parallel in Yuriev's utopian *Third Empire*, in which the West loses the war to Russia because of Russia's invisible defensive shield and its nuclear bombs.) Putin's threat of nuclear war on February 27, 2022, when he ordered his Minister of Defense and his Chief of the General Staff to put the nuclear deterrent on high alert in response to what he considered "aggressive Western statements against our country" and his suspension of Russia's participation in the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement with the US should be considered against this background.[39]

By conducting sham referendums in the occupied areas of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in Ukraine, Putin created a new pretext for his blackmail, as if in preparation for the use of nuclear weapons to "defend" Ukrainian territory from being retaken by the Ukrainian military. Nevertheless, Kherson was successfully liberated by Ukrainian forces in November 2022 with no such repercussions. So far, the "red lines" have proved to be quite flexible.

Two assumptions underlie Putin's nuclear blackmail. First, the West will back down because of its "responsible politics": faced with the prospect of a nuclear war, frightened citizens will push their democratically elected governments toward negotiation and appeasement. Second, the West's political unity against Russia cannot withstand the threat of nuclear Armageddon; instead, each country will scramble to save itself by brokering its own deal with the Kremlin. The West's decision to pull its punches after Russia's 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea probably reinforced those assumptions.

Bolstered by Putin, the Kremlin's propagandists have, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, been constantly elaborating on this topic.[40] Threats of a nuclear Armageddon for the US have been voiced by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the late leader of the extreme-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and the talking heads of Putinist propaganda, Margarita Simonyan and Vladimir Solovyov, among many others.[41]

Putin's apocalyptic discourse, which has infiltrated post-Soviet politics, does not stem uniquely from his mind. Along with the rest of his politics, it should be understood as part of the system of cultural and historical references that I have analyzed in this book. There are several historical circumstances and cultural patterns that have made apocalyptic thinking exceptionally prominent within the Russian far right.

The progressive vision of historical time had been carried forward by the West-oriented ideology. For the Russian leaders of the democratic reforms, the market economy was a guarantor of democracy, and Western capitalist prosperity, flickering alluringly on the horizon, was the model for imitation. But Russia arrived at democracy's doors when the crisis of progressive, futuristic temporality was bleeding into a crisis of democracy in the West. Among several other factors at play, this confluence contributed to the collapse of the West-oriented ideology in post-Soviet Russia and doubled the disappointment with futurecentric social thinking. Neomedieval memory politics and re-Stalinization bespeak an ongoing search for a suitable social model in the historical past, exposing the Kremlin's efforts to reverse time in the absence of a truly viable project to offer post-Soviet society. The Kremlin's military aggressions and imperial dreams also stem from this inability to formulate any attractive vision for this country's future.

As we have seen, the natural alliance between Putin and his cronies and the Russian far right predisposed the Kremlin to share the far right's vision of history. The advent of the New Middle Ages and the welcoming of the Apocalypse were ideas rudimentary enough to be adopted by Putin and his coterie. Saluting the "purifying fire of the Apocalypse" and the belief in the resurrection of the dead in the end times have always been an essential part of the Russian Orthodox doctrine, taken more *à la lettre* by the Russian Church than by any other Christian confession. The spread of several radical Orthodox sects, aptly termed "political Orthodoxy," has contributed to the growing popularity of apocalyptic expectations not only among post-Soviet laypersons but also within the Orthodox hierarchy.

Patriarch Kirill, who supports the war in Ukraine,[42] has practiced a Book of Revelation-style reckoning that has gained increasing traction especially since the annexation of Crimea and during the war in Ukraine.[43] Back in 2017, he declared, "One must be blind not to see the approach of the terrible moments in history of which the Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian spoke in his Revelation."[44] Since then, Kirill has repeatedly announced that doomsday is coming. In 2020, he urged his congregants to get ready for that dire event and for their own death.[45]

Because "God Himself brings about the Apocalypse," many among the clergy think that these "terrible moments in history" should be eagerly welcomed. For example, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, former spokesperson for the Russian Orthodox Church, propagated the notion that God has sanctioned "the annihilation of the masses" to "instruct society."[46] In provincial monasteries, services are sometimes conducted to prepare for the end of the world.[47] Many sectarians vociferously yearn for "the purifying fire of the Apocalypse."[48]

The impact of Russian Orthodoxy on the Russian far right's vision of historical time was probably intensified by the fact that, regardless of how influential various Western philosophical systems have been among Russian intellectuals, no original secular philosophical tradition has ever emerged in Russia that could have challenged the Orthodox dogmas and the far-right ideology. The Russian religious philosophers whose works were either censored or banned under Soviet rule (greatly enhancing their influence and popularity since *glasnost'*) were, almost without exception, Orthodox believers who, unlike most Western philosophers, unquestioningly adopted the dogmas of their Church into their philosophical reflections. Apocalyptic expectations played an important role in their characteristically Russian mix of theology and philosophical exploration. The apocalyptic vision of the future, central as it was for Fyodorov and the Russian cosmists, was also important to Lev Tikhomirov and Berdyaev, the gurus of the post-Soviet far right. Berdyaev anticipated the return to the New Middle Ages as a reversion to "the eternal past," which was for him a religious, rather than a historical, category. He insisted that the whole idea of progress should be cast out because it hides the true goal of existence, which is the knowledge of God. But even liberal theologists like Pavel Florensky also flirted with apocalypticism. In other words, Russian culture's inability to separate religious and secular thinking has created unique conditions for the stunning success of the neomedieval mindset among Russians and rendered the eschatological vision of history dominant.[49]

The spread of apocalyptic expectations formed a new context for post-Soviet politics, boosting neomedieval thinking in the so-called "Russian political class" and helping instill neomedieval temporality into the minds of post-Soviet subjects. The apocalyptic outlook was quite noticeable in Russian government circles and the media, with frequent allusions to the Biblical Apocalypse, long before the war in Ukraine. For example, Valery Zorkin, chairman of Russia's Constitutional Court, quoted from Thessalonians 2:7–10, to the effect that the end of the world is upon us and "the mystery of iniquity is already at work."[50] In 2011, Ivan Okhlobystin, a presidential candidate, made apocalyptic predictions an explicit part of his electoral campaign:

> The time for final preparations is coming. There shouldn't be anything superfluous. […] And […] the Slavs who have not obeyed this obvious truth are doomed.[51]

In a section of his *Doctrine-77* titled "The Last Battle," Okhlobystin says, "But our society is a society of others!" having already expanded on that concept of exceptionalism in these terms:

> We are made for war, and there is no place for us in ordinary peaceful times. […] The powers of geopolitical transformation have made us a unique ethnicity. […] [The process of Russian ethnogenesis] has constructed the ideal warrior […] to wage war all his life. And, providentially, for a Russian person not to carry out the above actions means certain death. All options for preserving the Russian nation are justified until the time appointed by the Lord for its disappearance in the fire of the Apocalypse.[52]

In the far right's discourse, apocalyptic themes are closely interwoven with the image of Putin as messiah, which is, in turn, likely to have influenced his self-perception. In 2007, Vladimir Solovyov, a television host and Putin propagandist, later notorious for his pronouncements on the war in Ukraine, published a novel, *The Apocalypse of Vladimir*, a sequel to his *Gospel of Vladimir* (2005). He repeats there the device used in the prequel, by presenting as his first-person narrator a fictional self with his own real name (which just happens to be shared by Putin). The Apostle Vladimir is described as destroying, in his wrath, thousands of sinners, including the entire city of Krasnoyarsk, by burning them alive and reducing them to blackened ashes in a matter of seconds. In these pages, the sinners are described as having perished unceremoniously, denied even the time to repent, in an eerie prefiguring of a later Putin speech.[53] Solovyov argues for the introduction of a hereditary "anti-democratic monarchy" with Putin as its tsar, and calls Putin "the tsar and the prophet," claiming that his mission is to prepare Russia for the Last Judgement, that "long-awaited, radiant day." This image of Putin is widespread among his supporters, from Vladislav Surkov, who once called Putin "a man sent to Russia by fate and the Lord,"[54] to a sect leader known as Mother Fotina, who believes that Putin is a reincarnation of Saint Paul and trusts that "God has appointed Putin to Russia to prepare Russia for the coming of Jesus Christ" because he "has the spirit of a tsar in him."[55]

Alexander Dugin's views provide another example of these ideas. For him and other neo-Eurasians, the Apocalypse is a "struggle between religion and pseudo-religion," between Russian Orthodoxy and Western liberalism. As Elliot Borenstein perceptively puts it: "The Russian Apocalypse […] depends on the outside world's continued existence as the source of evil."[56] Dugin, who has been known to criticize Putin, nevertheless expects him to become *katekhon* and implies that "the entire viability of Christianity as a whole is projected onto sacred politics, onto the tsar-katekhon."[57] Having most likely extracted the concept of katekhon from Snychov's writings, he defines "the kingdom of the Antichrist" as a combination of Western "globalization, post-liberalism, and post-industrial society,"[58] and claims that

> [a] Christian must believe in the Antichrist because this Christian dogma is related to the Apocalypse. […] We do not know when the Antichrist will come, but we know for sure that he will, because he is the essence of the Christian understanding of history. […] We are suffering under the sole of the Antichrist now – George Soros, American liberals are breaking the integrity in the world order, and they are worshipping him with joy.[59]

Earlier in his career, when he still stood beneath the banners of Russian National Bolshevism, Dugin declared, like many before him, that the Russians, heirs to Byzantium, and their tsar-katekhon had been chosen to keep the Antichrist in check until the end times came. For him, the life of the Church is inextricably linked with the life of the Empire and the sacrifices made in its name.[60] Dugin insists on the need to reverse historical time, which he understands as a Christian mission: Russia should travel back in time to Byzantium, to recreate the Holy Empire and the Orthodox monarchy:

> Thus, to come to Christ, one must travel the ecclesiological path in the opposite direction. […] A breakthrough in the direction of Byzantium, that is, in the direction of the Holy Empire, the Orthodox monarchy, and full-fledged Greco-Roman patristic theology in its full scope would be a qualitative advance.[61]

This certainty of the reversibility of historical time is characteristic not only of neo-Eurasianists but also of most of the present-day Russian far right.[62] Dugin is adamant that the Apocalypse is not a metaphor "apt to mobilize the masses, but a religious fact – the fact of the Apocalypse,"[63] and considers "the kingdom of the Antichrist" another such "religious fact."[64] "His Fire is the Judge," and it should and will burn the Earth.[65] For Dugin, the Apocalypse is not something to be avoided and averted: indeed, the neo-Eurasian movement must help it happen because it may not come by itself. Dugin sees the triggering of the Apocalypse as "a practice," as he states in his *Fourth Political Theory*:

> The end times and the eschatological meaning of politics will not realize themselves on their own. We will wait for the end in vain. The end will never come if we wait for it […] The end of days should come, but it will not come by itself. It is a task, it is not a certainty. It is active metaphysics. It is a practice.[66]

Consistent with the idea that the Apocalypse is a practice, in 2011 Dugin and his neo-Eurasian movement organized a three-day camp for Eurasian youth named *Finis Mundi*, whose slogan proclaimed "the eschatological mobilization of Eurasians."[67] He also hosted a program called *Finis Mundi* on the popular radio station FM101. Periodically delivered declarations to the effect that "The Antichrist is already here!"[68] clearly help him stay on track with his project. At this point, though, he appears to be conflating the idea of empire with the end of the world.[69]

The authors of the pamphlet *The Newest Middle Ages*[70] went even further in their pragmatic eschatology, to encompass not only the Orthodox crusade but also the Russian colonization of Heaven. They establish the final goal of what they call "The national project of Holy Rus," which involves the ascension to paradise "of such a quantity of Russian saints as would de facto establish Rus in the kingdom of heaven," in tune with Fyodorov's philosophy and Sharov's writings. Russia, the authors proclaim, is the Third Rome and "an empire-state, which has as its mission the end of times." Like Snychov, they announce that Russia is the katekhon that holds back the Antichrist, defining it as "the conservation of a political regime based on justice, a clear ethical distinction between good and evil, and a readiness to punish the evil and reward the good." Further, katekhon is "a universal justification of state and statehood" and validates the state's right to violence. Being katekhon, Russia has a "geopolitical mission to be a guardian of the world order." The "export" of Russian Orthodoxy and this world order is set as a task for the Russian state, which should be carried out through "military expansion in its military, diplomatic and cultural dimensions." This "eschatologico-political mission" is the true predestination of the Russian state-civilization.

The apocalyptic vision of the future creates a bridge between the Russian far right and post-Soviet writers who revel in neomedievalism.[71] The apocalyptic understanding of history finds a clear parallel in the following reflection from an interview given by Sharov, who, as the reader will recall, was persistently preoccupied with understanding the purpose of history. His reflections about the end of the world resonate remarkably well with Putin's own observations on the subject, as in the following interview conducted by Georgi Borisov:

> [Sharov]: But it must be said that the conviction that the end of Rus will mean the end of the whole world – as well as the belief that real life exists only in the relationship between God and His new chosen people, and everything else is no more than architectural superfluities – is alive even to this day. Moreover, every crisis that has happened to us, all of that has only developed and strengthened [this belief].
>
> [Borisov]: Is that close to the way you feel?
>
> [Sharov]: Probably yes, in part. The country, the people are what they are, and if we want to understand anything, it is impossible to begin anywhere else.[72]

Like Vodolazkin, enthusiastic endorser of Sharov's last book, and many other post-Soviet writers, Vladimir Sharov holds that Russians believe they are a chosen people, and that this belief guides their understanding of history:

> [T]errible disasters – catastrophes, famine, enemy invasions – drive people, with incredible force, out of their ordinary life (which is being destroyed before our eyes with all its culture, with all its rules and customs), making

> them a people that is turned toward the end, toward the last times and the Last Judgement. A people that from time immemorial has lived in such a way as to be always ready to stand before the Lord.[73]

As Bradley Gorski puts it, "Sharov's novels present Russian history as energized by a single overriding desire: to prepare for the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment, which will inevitably take place in Russia."[74]

The Izborsky Club's profound engagement with eschatological beliefs is best reflected in the statements of its chairperson, Alexander Prokhanov. He sees "waiting for the heavenly kingdom" of "eternal life" as encrypted in the "magical codes" of the Russian mind.[75] He links those "codes" to the Russian messianic idea that was manifested in its Middle Ages.[76] An admirer of Nikolay Fyodorov, Prokhanov is eagerly awaiting the resurrection of the dead:

> Speaking of our cosmic might, we should not forget that the rockets invented by Tsiolkovsky are the means by which the resurrected generations will spread to other planets. So taught Tsiolkovsky's great mentor, the cosmist Nikolay Fyodorov.[77]

Like Egor Kholmogorov and other champions of Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy, Prokhanov thinks of "the Russian Orthodox Bomb," manufactured "under the patronage of Saint Serafim of Sarov" as the way to accomplish his "Russian dream."[78]

The banality of post-Soviet thinking about the imminent end of the world is best summarized by an assertion made by a rank-and-file Russian university professor:

> Humanity has always desired the Apocalypse. The contemporary world, like the Middle Ages, is longing for the Apocalypse, yet for a different reason: a world without Apocalypse is boring beyond belief.[79]

This trivialized approach to the end of the world lays bare the profound absence of positive ideology in a society ruled by a cynical denial of the value of human life and individual rights, a society that offers no better prospect for the future than a reversion to the Russian Middle Ages.

Eschatological politics and the incitement of terror are deeply rooted in Russia's anti-Western cultural tradition, Russian Orthodoxy, and popular beliefs, but the idea that humanity is doomed is not without parallel in Western culture too. The apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies and fiction of the past decade have persistently described the extinction of humanity, frequently in favor of another intelligent species, and not just as a natural development but even as a desirable one. However, today's apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic genres are more often than not entirely disconnected from the Biblical themes of hope and redemption that have nourished apocalyptic thinking for thousands of years.[80] Unlike pre-1990s fiction, where "not even the most pessimistic

apocalyptist closes the door completely to some kind of continuity through rebirth" and often "destruction functions as a prelude to restoration,"[81] the anti-human paradigm in this genre now voices a growing contempt for humankind and offers the death of humanity as an outcome devoutly to be wished. Depictions of the violence sweeping the world – the apocalyptic genre's key element – are avidly consumed by audiences. The vision of time this genre proposes rejects the very idea that humanity has any future.

This mood resonates with several philosophical and social trends that popular culture has tapped into. The longing for some "conclusive catastrophe" is categorized as typical of a modernity that speaks to "a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture."[82] This diagnosis sits well with the fascination with the end of humanity that has been characteristic of French Theory since Foucault and Derrida.[83] The Apocalypse, among all else, is apt to be embraced as the end of the capitalist system, which in the words of Slavoj Žižek, is approaching "its apocalyptic zero point."[84] Žižek praises Alain Badiou for welcoming the end of the world, and for his audacity in "engaging in fidelity to a Truth-Event, even if it ends in a catastrophe" and his unwillingness to reduce "politics to a program of avoiding the worst."[85] Posthumanism, an offspring of deconstruction, promotes the erasure of humans and human-centered concepts from philosophy and the humanities. Several influential social movements, including transhumanism, animal rights, and radical ecology, eagerly advocate for the end of human civilization.

Over the last decade, calling humans a "selfish and destructive pest" has become a commonplace that surprises no one, no matter how redolent it may be of human-centered hate speech.[86] The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement is a classic illustration of this ethos: its goal is for humans to stop reproducing, restoring the planet's ecological balance by liberating it from humanity. So far, however – and despite their growing influence – this and similar movements, whose members enjoy protection as private individuals and humans under the West's democratic legislation and human-rights guarantees, have not garnered any significant political support for their projects.

The fixation on the end of the world has long been a subject of considerable interest for the humanities. Perhaps taking a cue from Susan Sontag's interpretation of the Apocalypse as a spectacle that helps address the anxieties of destruction,[87] a whole range of features – the angst of war and global insecurity, the dread of environmental disaster, and disquiet over pandemics, pressing social inequality, and unresolved race and gender issues – figure prominently among explanations for the allure of apocalyptic themes.[88] Scholars also argue that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives may assist in coping with the fear of death and even help us "make sense of the world."[89]

Alongside these explanations, I believe that the appeal of commodified anti-humanism constitutes the essence of the contemporary fascination with the end of the world and could be seen as the ultimate manifestation of the crisis of the future. The mounting hatred of humanity precludes the very possibility of any

vision of the future that does not involve some kind of terminal catastrophe. And since the project of democracy is always future-oriented, the crisis of the future only deepens the crisis of democracy. Whether supported by religious fundamentalism or fostered by radical secular philosophical and cultural systems, neomedieval reversed temporality may be seen as a reaction to this crisis, and a primary reason for the omnipresent fascination with the Middle Ages.

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The war against Ukraine has made it clear that neomedieval memory politics and the neomedieval mindset, with its eschatological beliefs, are powerful weapons that can be successfully targeted against democracy.

The longer the war continues, the darker become the prospects for Russia. By devastating the Ukrainian land, Putinism is obliterating Russia's chances for survival as a united country and a unified culture. But Putinism did not emerge on February 24, 2022, nor was it generated by Putin and his cronies without significant support from Russian society. The unwillingness to assess critically the crimes committed by the Russian nation in the past has conditioned the triumph of the memory of the perpetrators in post-Soviet Russia and transformed the memories of state terror into mobmemory. The fortress built by political neomedievalism in the minds of Russians, of which the Kremlin stands as a symbol, may continue to sustain Putinism even after the dictator is gone, relentlessly nurturing it with human lives.

Notes

1 See Dina Khapaeva, *Crimes sans châtiment*, trans. Nina Kehayan (La Tour-d'Aigues: Eds. de l'Aube, 2023).

2 On the fascist roots of Putinism, and on the debates on whether Putinism is fascism, see Alexander Motyl, "Putin's Russia as a Fascist Political System," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2016, 49: 25–36; Motyl, "Yes, Putin and Russia Are Fascist – A Political Scientist Shows How They Meet the Textbook definition," *The Conversation*, March 30, 2022; Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Putin's Russia: A Moderate Fascist State," *The American Interest*, 12/4, January 23, 2017; Timothy Snyder, "We Should Say It: Russia Is Fascist," *New York Times*, May 19, 2022; and Richard Shorten, "Putin's Not a Fascist, Totalitarian or Revolutionary – He's a Reactionary Tyrant," *The Conversation*, March 17, 2022. Marlène Laruelle, in line with her generous view of Putinism, argues that Putinism should not be considered a fascist regime, or even one that is dominated by the far right but simply as an "illiberal" one. Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021). She also calls on her readers to "analyze Neo-Eurasianism without judging it." Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*,13.

3 www.reuters.com/world/europe/sledgehammer-execution-russian-mercenary-who-defected-ukraine-shown-video-2022-11-13/.

4 Dina Khapaeva, *Goticheskoe obshchestvo. Morfologiia koshmara* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007); Khapaeva, "History Without Memory: Gothic Morality in Post-Soviet Society," *Eurozine,* 02/02/2009 (translation of "Geschichte ohne Erinnerung. Zur Moral der postsowjetischen Gesellschaft," Merkur, 12/62, December 2008, pp. 1081–1091); Khapaeva, "Historical Memory in

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5 Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag, from Collectivization to the Great Terror*, trans. Vadim Staklo (New Haven, CT, London: Yale University Press, 2004), 234.
6 Applebaum, *Gulag*, xxviii.
7 Varlam Shalamov, *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1992), vol. 1, 138.
8 Applebaum, *Gulag*, 574.
9 Lev Klein, *Perevernutyi mir* (Donetsk: Donetskii natsional'nyi universitet, 2010), 210. Lev Samoilovich Klein (1927–2019) wrote under the pen name Lev Samoilov about his prison experiences in his book-length article "Journey into a World Upside Down" ("Puteshestvie v perevernutyi mir," *Neva*, 1989, 4).
10 Dina Khapaeva, "Goticheskoe obshchestvo," *Kriticheskaia massa*, 2006, 1: 39–52.
11 On Putin's inner circle and its financial domination of Russia, see Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (New York: William Collins, 2020). See also Genri Meier and Il'ia Arkhipov, "Ottsy, deti i rossiiskie igrishcha v bor'be za vlast'," *InoPressa* (*Business Week)*, May 20, 2011. www.inopressa.ru/article/20may2011/businessweek/russia.html.
12 Thomas F. Remington, "Russian Economic Inequality in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics*, 2018, 50/3: 398. Note also "Pochti vsemi bogatstvami Rossii vladeiut 3 protsenta naseleniia," *DW*, April 12, 2019, and "Neskol'ko soten bogateishikh rossiian vladeiut 40% vsekh finansovykh aktivov, prinadlezhashchikh grazhdanam strany, otsenila Boston Consulting Group. Eto bolee $600 mlrd," *RBK*, June 10, 2021.
13 For example, lawsuits filed by Savva Terenti'ev (*Meduza*, August 28, 2018) and Irek Murtazin (*Radio Svoboda*, April 20, 2010). See also Nikita Zeia, "Militsiia ne sotsial'naia gruppa," *gazeta.ru*, October 11, 2011; and "Politsiia – ne sotsial'naia gruppa. Ugolovnoe delo v otnoshenii aktivistov art-gruppy 'Voina' zakryto," *sova-tsentr*, October 16, 2011.
14 http://premier.gov.ru/events/news/18052/.
15 Pavel Aptekar', "Novaia soslovnaia Rossiia," *Vedomosti*, June 26, 2018. On the *siloviki* as Russia's highest estates, see https://echo.msk.ru/blog/btiraspolsky/927556-echo/.
16 Viktor Savenkov, "Soslovnoe obshchestvo po-putinski," *Svobodnaia pressa*, December 1, 2011; "Strana rabov, strana gospod. Kak v Rossii nastupilo Novoe Srednevekov'e," *Radio Liberty*, September 2021.
17 Aptekar', "Novaia soslovnaia Rossiia."
18 www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/197/signatures.
19 The latest data available on *Global Slavery Index* dates to 2018. In 2018, the prevalence of slavery based on the percentage of the population in servitude and the estimated number of people enslaved per country placed Russia in 64th place out of 167 (the US ranks 158th). Among the structural elements that contribute to slavery in Russia is the country's role in human trafficking: prior to quasi-total state political control over sensitive information like slavery, the Russian Federation had been called one of the leaders in that sphere by independent researchers: Yury Levchenko, "Torgovlia liudmi i legalizatsiia prestupnyh dokhodov," *Rossiiskaia iustitsiia: Nauchnoe-prakticheskoe posobie*, 2004, 6: 28–29.
20 "V Rossii po-prezhnemu primeniaetsia rabskii trud," *Krasnoiarskaia Pravda*, June 30, 2011. http://kras-pravda.ru/newspaper/2011/11/v-rossii-po-prezhnemu-primenjaetsja-rabskij-trud.html; Elena Tiuriukanova, "Torgovlia liud'mi v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: Obzor i analiz tekushchei situatsii po probleme." www.un.org/ru/rights/trafficking/human_trafficking_russia.pdf; "V Rossii na fabrike ispol'zovali rabskii trud detei immigrantov." https://tengrinews.kz/accidents/rossii-fabrike-ispolzovali-rabskiy-trud-detey-immigrantov-35237/; "Rabskii trud v sovremennoi Rossii," *Radio Svoboda*, June 11, 2008; Alec Luhn, "'Like

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25 "Strane nuzhny deshevye rabochie FSINa," *Kommersant*, May 25, 2015. See also "Rabskii trud zakliuchennykh v Rossii," *Rus' sidiashchaia*, September 11, 2014. Pro-Kremlin journalists and commentators supported the legislation, even going so far as to lobby for the restoration of labor camps in post-Soviet Russia: Viktoriia Nikiforova, "Rossiiskie zakliuchennye zarabotaiut na kvartirakh," *RIA-Novosti*. https://ria.ru/20210523/gulag-1733466440.html. See also Nikiforova, "'Zdravstvui, GULAG!' Sotseti o predlozhenii vozrodit' v Rossii GULAG." www.severreal.org/a/31270882.html.
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62 Inviting his readers to "join him in a journey back to the Middle Ages," Valerii Korovin, deputy chair of the International Eurasian Movement, editor-in-chief of the media resource "Evraziia," and a former member of the National-Bolshevik Party, argues that the Middle Ages were humanity's Golden Age. Like Berdyaev, whose text he follows closely, Korovin believes in the inevitable comeback of the Middle Ages: for both post-Soviet Russia and the West of today, the only choice is the one between a return to their own national Middle Ages or a disastrous detour to ISIS.

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