Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction

Alexander Etkind

Current Russian politics shows little regret for the millions who perished in the Soviet terror, but post-Soviet culture has produced unusual, maybe even perverted, forms of memory. Understanding them depends on the idea of memory as a performative interplay of cultural energies—memory that follows history but has a history of its own. As Walter Benjamin put it, “memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. . . . He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.”¹ This theater of buried and exhumed memories selectively includes knowledge of the past; but more often than not, its performances defy rational explanation or historical precision.

Two processes converge on the stage of postcatastrophic memory, the defamiliarization of the past and the return of the repressed. Excavating the past buried in the present, the scholar of a postcatastrophic culture watches memory turning into imagination. In Russia, many authors and readers seem to share a desire for a poetic reenactment of the catastrophic past. My point is that this is melancholy rather than nostalgia. Melancholy, famously counterposed against “healthy mourning” by Sigmund Freud, embraces the confusion between the present and the past, the obsessive reenactment of the loss, and the cessation of the relationship to the present. “The inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely.”² The dialectic of reenactment and defamiliarization produces a rich but puzzling imagery. If we want to “understand” postcatastrophic culture, we need to “see” what is absorbing it so entirely.

In this article, I look at the Russian memory of the Soviet terror as an enormous cultural formation that encompasses different media and genres, incompatible versions of history, and various rituals of mourning. Uncomfortably for the historian, postcatastrophic memory often entails allegories rather than facts. “The only pleasure the melancholic permits

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himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory,” said Benjamin. However unrecognizable, these allegorical images retain their dependency upon the past; but this relationship cannot be described in those terms that Russian cultural criticism is accustomed to. In the emerging field of Russian memory studies, concepts are either imported from the neighboring fields of Holocaust studies or postcolonial studies, or invented anew. Combining these approaches, I coin the concept “magical historicism” to define the bizarre but instructive imagery that has evolved out of postcatastrophic, post-Soviet culture.

**Unjustified Repressions**

In the novel *Opravdanie* (Justification, 2001), Dmitrii Bykov presents the young Moscow historian, Slava Rogov. Rogov is obsessed with his grandfather who was arrested in 1938. Struggling to find his grandfather, Rogov develops an ingenious theory of Stalinism. Those “repressions,” he thinks, could not be “unjustified”; they must have had an interpretable meaning. Rogov theorizes that people were subjected to unbearable suffering in order to select out those few who were fit to survive it all. Those who gave up under torture and confessed to invented crimes betrayed Iosif Stalin by doing so and had to perish; those who resisted to the end were preserved, healed, and trained. As operatives and leaders, these people changed the course of World War II and the Cold War, Rogov believes. Inspired by this theory, he travels to Siberia in hope of finding his grandfather on a secret Soviet-style reservation. On his journey, he discovers a clandestine community of religious sectarians with weird rituals, a sadomasochist resort in which New Russians torture their peers for pleasure, and finally, a Siberian marsh, where he drowns himself.

In this fantasy, the flamboyant author and media anchor Bykov has touched a nerve of post-Soviet memory. By creating a direct connection between grandsons and grandfathers, the fictional post-Soviet family renders the final Soviet generation irrelevant. Andrei Bitov should be


4. Bykov’s logic of torture differs from a more familiar understanding articulated by Arthur Koestler in his *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (New York, 1941). As Koestler sees it, torture convinces the true-believer that the party really wants his confession as another sacrifice for its cause.


6. This construction develops the better-known Russian speculation on “literary generations” advanced by Viktor Shklovskii. In his postrevolutionary essay on Rozanov (1921), Viktor Shklovskii stated that in literature, “inheritance proceeds not from father to eldest son but from uncle to nephew.” Viktor Shklovskii, *O teorii prozy* (Leningrad, 1929) emphasized leaps in two directions, backward and forward, as mechanisms of “literary evolution.” Like these genealogical models, Bykov’s characters (and Bitov’s, as we shall see) avoid immediate predecessors in favor of more distant forebears.
credited with inventing a similar motif; in his pre-post-Soviet novel *Pushkinskii dom* (Pushkin house, 1978), Odoevtsev, a young literary scholar from Leningrad, already wishes to undo the Soviet experience by rejecting his father and meeting his grandfather. In contrast to Rogov who was born too late, Odoevtsev does find his grandfather. Once a famous scholar, he has just returned from the gulag, spends time drinking in the company of his former jailer, and feels little interest in his grandson.7 Both novels confront Soviet history with a desperate quest for its meaning. Importantly, central characters in both novels are historians, professionals of memory (Odoevtsev is a scholar of nineteenth-century literature; Rogov is a trained historian and writer). In Bykov’s *Justification*, however, Rogov’s doomed longing for his grandfather takes a form of paranoia (an obsession that results in delusions) rather than melancholy (a failure to separate from the lost object). Odoevtsev survives his heavy drinking to become an established scholar at the Soviet Academy of Sciences; Rogov commits suicide. In comparing these texts, one observes that the pain of memory for the lost grandfathers has not been much alleviated during the last thirty years.

While the state is led by former KGB officers who avoid giving public apologies, building monuments, or opening archives, the struggling civil society and the intrepid reading public are possessed by the unquiet ghosts of the Soviet era. In contemporary Russia, there is no consensus on the crucial issues of historical memory. Reflecting the moving equilibrium between the competing forces of politics, culture, and time, generally accepted definitions of what is “right” and “healthy” in the memory of the Soviet past shift with every new generation. Various cultural genres contest, change, and reestablish these definitions in multiple ways. In 2007, Vladimir Putin’s administration approved the guidelines for the new Soviet history textbook. Describing Stalin’s terror as “the price of the great achievements of the Soviet Union,” it states that the violence achieved “the utmost efficiency of the ruling elite.” Stalin’s purges shaped “the new managerial class, which was adequate to the tasks of modernization. . . . This class was unconditionally loyal to those in power. Its executive discipline was irreproachable.”8 No count of victims is impressive enough to overshadow these fabulous results. Filippov’s textbook does not deny the mass violence of Stalin’s era but entertains the radical transformation of

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8. Aleksandr Filippov, *Noveshaia istoriia Rossii, 1945–2006 gg.: Kniga dlia uchitelia* (Moscow, 2007), 90. This book was the subject of several conferences of teachers and heated debates in the press. Despite the public outrage, the presidential administration supported the use of Filippov’s book in high schools. Based on these guidelines, the actual textbook for Russian high schools is being prepared; in December 2007, the authors declared that they would soften their formulations on Stalin and the repressions. The composition of this textbook was overseen by a leading ideologist of Putin’s government, Gleb Pavlovskii, who asserts that “the Soviet Union is the global treasure of social, legal, and existential models.” Pavlovskii, “Predislovie,” in Natal’ia N. Kozlova, *Sovetskie liud’i: Stenov iz istorii* (Moscow, 2005), 4–5.
its meaning. Indeed, nothing is more absurd and more terrifying than absurd terror. Striving to interpret it, one has speculative license that can only be used or abused in radical ways, because facts of Soviet history tend to remain more bizarre than the strangest allegations about them. Essentially, the history textbook for Russian high schools presents as truth the same idea that Bykov’s novel explored as a paranoiac delusion: that the mass violence of the early Soviet era helped to shape the New Soviet Man, the tortured Bolshevik version of the Übermensch.

By historical standards, the Soviet catastrophe is recent and the memory of it fresh. In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev initiated his de-Stalinization campaign. To explain what had happened, he introduced a few concepts that are still with us. As the idiom for mass murders, arrests, and deportations, he chose the phrase neobosnovannye repressii. These “unjustified repressions,” which were always mentioned in the plural, present a striking concept: a formula for senseless acts of violence that do not specify agency and, therefore, elude responsibility. In contrast to the Nazi terror, in the Soviet Union no specific group (as defined by ethnicity, territory, profession, age, gender, and so on) suffered significantly more than other groups, with one exception: “A particularly heavy toll among Stalin’s victims was, of course, extracted from the state and party apparatus.” Conflating subject and object in a stereotypically Russian manner, Soviet repressions differed from Nazi German exterminations, in which the victims and perpetrators were distanced by crystal-clear constructions. “Unjustified repressions” mean, exactly, self-imposed, meaningless social catastrophe.

There have been three stages in the Russian memory of these “repressions”: denial, repression, and interpretation. Khrushchev’s “revelations” of 1956 brought an end to the stage of denial, which had been the official policy for decades. The subsequent thirty years were marked by inconsistent moves that revealed as much as they obscured. Transferred from politics to culture, the work of memory became the most sensitive ideological issue of the regime. Political dissidence and cultural achievement melded

9. Recent collection of documents in seven volumes, Istoriia stalinskogo GULAGa, ed. Iurii N. Afanas’ev and V. P. Kozlov, started with vol. 1, Massovye repressii v SSSR (Moscow, 2004).


11. For grand-scale events like the Soviet terror, I prefer the concept of catastrophe to the related concept of trauma. For classical studies on trauma and memory, see Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore, 1996); Domenic LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma (Baltimore, 2001); Duncan Bell, ed., Memory, Trauma, and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present (New York, 2006). For approaches to catastrophe and the postcatastrophic, see Susan Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); Anson Rabinbach, In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment (Berkeley, 1997); Moishe Postone and Eric L. Santner, eds., Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century (Chicago, 2003); Dorothea Olkowski, “Catastrophe,” in Karyn Bell, ed., Traumatizing Theory: The Cultural Politics of Affect in and beyond Psychoanalysis (New York, 2007), 41–66.
in such works of history and literature as *Arkhipelag GULAG* (The gulag archipelago) by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (published in the west in 1973 and in Russia in 1989) and *Zhizn’ i sud’ba* (Life and fate) by Vasilii Grossman (1980 in the west and in 1988 in Russia). In response, the communist ideologists launched a veritable memory war, which distanced the cultural elite and contributed to the regime’s imminent decay. Playing with two meanings of “repression,” the Soviet and historical on the one hand, the western and psychoanalytic on the other hand, I would call this dark period of memory “the repression of repressions.” Starting from the “perestroika” of the mid-1980s, new revelations documented the processes, institutes, and personalities of terror with unprecedented details. The period of “glasnost” produced an amazing array of republications, translations, memoirs, and original studies of Stalinism. Historical novels, films, and documentaries were produced and disseminated in abundance. In the Russian politics, media, and popular history of the last decade, “the legacy of the 1990s” has been intensely challenged and revised. Very often, these contemporary debates address the Soviet past. Historical facts, as they were revealed by the previous generation of authors and readers, have not been reconsidered. Their interpretation is the issue.

Since we lack an all-embracing concept of the Soviet catastrophe, the gulag has become the Russian counterpart for the Holocaust. Historically, the gulag is the bureaucratic acronym of the Stalin era’s State Administration of Camps, which was closed in 1960. The late Veniamin Iofe, probably the most impressive intellectual of the memorial movement in Russia, defined the gulag as the summary term for Soviet oppression, including its long-standing internalized form. “Our compatriots still have the gulag within,” Iofe wrote in 2001. With this range of definitions, it is not surprising that the number of gulag victims is uncertain; the available estimates range between 5 and 30 million. Indeed, the only certainty about

12. For a comprehensive analysis of various genres of memory of the gulag, see Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington, 2000); see also Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca, 1996). In recent years, autobiographical accounts have received more scholarly attention than other forms of memory; see Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York, 1995); Irina Paperno, “Personal Accounts of the Soviet Experience,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 577–610; Jochen Hellbeck and Klaus Heller, eds., *Autobiographical Practices in Russia/Autobiographische Praktiken in Russland* (Göttingen, 2004). Jehanne Gheith suggests that the survivors of the gulag do not easily tell their autobiographical stories but rather develop non-narrative forms of memory, such as naming a dog something that is reminiscent of their camp experience. Jehanne Gheith, “‘I Never Talked . . .’: Trauma, the Non-Narrative, and the Gulag,” *Mortality* 12, no. 2 (2007): 159–75.

the Soviet catastrophe is its scale and its uncertainty. We do not have the list of victims; we do not have the list of executioners; and we do not have adequate memorials, museums, and monuments to stabilize the understanding of these events for generations to come.

**Victims into Sacrifices**

Founded in 1987 by enthusiasts of memory who started a campaign for the national monument to the victims of repressions, Memorial is a nongovernmental organization with a complex, ambivalent-to-hostile relationship to the Russian state. The first memorial, a simple granite stone, was erected in 1989 in the cemetery on Solovetski Island by Iofe and a group of activists from Memorial. Years later, the same group erected stones from Solovetski in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1999, at the Solovetski cemetery, Iofe said that his stone was a “question mark that asked about the meaning of this tragedy. We wanted to understand why all these millions were sacrificed, if they were indeed sacrificed. What was the supreme value that demanded these sacrifices?” Iofe’s doubt about the very idea of sacrifice is well justified. Giorgio Agamben, in philosophical work partially inspired by the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, developed the concept of *Homo sacer*, defined as “a human victim that may be killed but not sacrificed.” The “bare life” of this victim makes an exception to any legal, political, or religious order. It differs from the political life that has a recognized value and may be sacrificed by one’s own or a sovereign’s will; then this life would be remembered as that of a hero or a martyr. Living in the “zone of exception” from the laws and customs of the state, *Homo sacer* is subject to the exclusive competence of the sovereign. Though these zones of exception are always porous and their borders are never stable, the rules and norms that define life in these zones cannot be expressed in terms that are meaningful outside these zones.

As often happens in mundane situations of violence or premature death, the victims, and even more so their peers and their descendants, wish to find meaning in their suffering. If meaning can be discovered, then death becomes a sacrifice, rather than just a loss or a murder. Mass murders can be sacrificially interpreted in religious terms, as punishment for sins, or in political terms, as the cost of nation building, modernization, or similar causes. The Russian language adds to the possible confusion: the Russian word *zhertva* has both meanings, “victim” and “sacrifice,” though the word *zhertvoprinoshenie* definitely means “sacrifice.” Iofe’s refusal to interpret murder as sacrifice motivated his choice of the simple local stone, an empty signifier or “question mark,” as the proper form of the memorial: “an ordinary natural stone which, with time, could probably

take a more definite contour, but this will happen only with time, when we reach a new understanding.”

(Interestingly, Iofe imagined that his monument would undergo a spontaneous adjustment, something like a self-fashioning that would adapt it to the changing understanding of history.) What is truly important for this memorial practice is location—the site of the murder, the place of origin of the stone. Though Iofe fought against the interference of the Orthodox Church in the mourning for nonbelievers and his idea of memory was explicitly nonconfessional, his choice of a large and local memorial object like a stone suggests his sense of the spirit of place, which remains after a murder or even travels with a stone to another place. Indeed, there is no explanation for why huge boulders had to be transported thousands of miles away, from Solovki to Moscow and St. Petersburg, unless the spirit of the place travels with them.

In 1991, the statue to the founder of Soviet political terror and the Solovetskii camp, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, was replaced by a monument to its victims, the stone brought from this camp (in 2002, another Solovetskii stone was erected in St. Petersburg). Understanding its meaning all too well, Iuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, made plans to officially reinstate the statue to Dzerzhinskii. Various compromises have been discussed, one of them being the replacement of the Solovetskii stone with a gigantic water clock. Two symbolic visions compete on this spot, one of historical time, which changes by leaps from the old condition (monument to the executioner) to the new and radically different one (monument to his victims); another of circular time, which always returns to the starting point, like a water clock.

The monument in Sandarmokh shows an angel with widespread wings whose hands are tied. On the top of a high stone obelisk, an inscription declares, “People, do not kill each other.” This figurative sculpture was created in 1998 by Grigorii Saltup, a prolific artist and writer from Petrozavodsk. Today, the memorial in Sandarmokh is arguably the most important, and best developed, of secular sites of memory of the Soviet victims. Its most impressive element consists of sharply pointed wooden stakes (stolbtsy) marking every mass grave. Dozens of these markers are scattered around the pine forests.

According to the recent (August to September 2007) exhibition of monuments to the victims of the gulag (curators Liudmila Vasilovskaia and Galina Atmaskhina), there are 1,140 such monuments and memorial plaques within the territory of the former Soviet Union: stones, crosses, crosses, crosses.


18. For discussion of these events and proposals, see Catherine Merridale, Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia (New York, 2001); Kathleen E. Smith, Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era (Ithaca, 2002).

19. Saltup writes that the Karelian government promised money for the monument but never provided it; Saltup believes that the ministry wanted a kickback. Working from the three-meter model in his workshop, Saltup mortgaged his apartment, reduced the size of the project, and completed it in a local factory Grigorii Saltup, Barak i sto deviatnadtsatyi (Petrozavodsk, 2004).
obelisks, bells, bas-reliefs, and angels. There are also strange monsters—a monument in Magadan by Ernst Neizvestny, which represents a huge concrete Leviathan composed of multiple human faces with a cross in place of the nose; a monument in St. Petersburg by Mikhail Shemiakin, which represents two sphinxes; and “Molokh totalitarizma” in Levashovo (by N. Galitskaia and V. Gambarov), which shows a robotic cannibal devouring or raping a human figure. There are very few realistic monuments that depict an actual prisoner in a moment of suffering. Interestingly, if anthropomorphic sculptures are found at all, they are usually erected in places like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, or Tuva, where a bare, senseless life in the camp is easier to reimagine as a sacrifice to the nationalist cause (for example, in the Tuva republic, a huge bronze man in national clothing was erected early in 1989 with the inscription, “The Untamed. To the victims of political repressions in Tuva”). The imagining of meaningless suffering requires nonhuman, abstract, or monstrous symbols. The general rule seems to be that guilt monuments are nonfigurative, while pride monuments tend to depict people, on horseback or not.

Monuments to the Soviet victims have been built by the civil society, but the resources necessary for these monuments, starting with their sites, are controlled by the state. The only trustworthy feature of the memorialized event seems to be the location of the murders—Butovo, Sandarmokh, Levashovo . . . the site of memory, as the French historian Pierre Nora called it in his groundbreaking study. However, many monuments are erected, not on the former sites of murder, but near them: near the KGB edifice on Lubyanka Square in Moscow, across the Neva from the Kresty prison in St. Petersburg, in the yard of the KGB residence in Vologda. Rather than the replacement of the old regime by a new one, this pattern instead suggests their quiet coexistence. But even such proximate location of memory is far from being the rule in Russia. Near the building of the Leningrad NKVD-KGB-FSB there is not a single plaque commemorating the thousands or, perhaps, millions of its victims. Such a monument is absent from the vicinity of the Kremlin as well.

Existing museums or exhibitions reconstruct a barrack, a cell, or barbed wire—things that were present when the camp functioned. In contrast, memorial obelisks, stones, and stakes were not present in the camps and do not imitate the historical reality. Perhaps a way to interpret such a monument’s vertical shape and central location is to imagine a wooden stake nailing a mythological vampire to the ground. In the tradition of Russian scholarship, there was a theoretical attempt to conceptualize the autonomous life of monuments. Roman Jakobson noted that in celebrated poems by Pushkin (Mednyi vsadnik [The bronze horseman],


Kamennyi gost’ [The stone guest], for example) a human character confronts a statue that comes to life to deprive the character of his mind or life.\(^{22}\) A contrasting idea was formulated more recently by another Russian-American scholar, Mikhail Iampolski, who believes that a monument creates a “mystical protective zone” that induces “the experience of temporal metamorphosis,” a sacrificial space that stops the flow of time.\(^{23}\) Both positions are justified. Precisely because monuments freeze history, their rare moments of dynamism are imbued with uncanny effects resulting from the exchange between the living and the dead. The mystical or hallucinatory resurgence of monuments, as in Pushkin’s poems, is uncanny; real and practical events that happen to monuments, such as their removal, destruction, vandalism, or renaming, also provoke strong responses in the observers. In Pushkin’s Mednyi vsadnik, the uncanny effect was created by a monument that was moving in the text; symmetrically, texts are able to vitalize monuments when they penetrate the monumental space. It is the combination of stones and texts that makes monuments work; without words, the meaning of these stones would be undecipherable. For example, strong inscriptions, such as “To the victims of communism,” complement the Solovetskii stone in St. Petersburg. Such a monument can also be vandalized by words. I witnessed the results of such an attempt, in which unknown vandals wrote on the Solovetskii stone in St. Petersburg in red oil, “Too few were shot.” Near the Solovetskii stone in Moscow, on 29 October 2007, Memorial commemorated the seventy years since the start of the Great Terror by reading the names of its victims. For twelve hours, volunteers read aloud the 2,600,000 names of those who were shot in 1937–1938. Some of those who read these names spontaneously added descriptive identifiers—my grandfather, my uncle, and on on. Memorial intends to repeat this performance annually; indeed, in many provincial centers such as Vologda, descendants of the victims come annually to the local memorials, on “The Day of the Political Prisoners” on 30 October.

In this way, the monument becomes the center of a social ritual that integrates this construction with ceremonial texts and performative acts in an organized, politically meaningful spectacle of memory. Two types of texts interact in this ritual: short and clear inscriptions on the monument (for example, on the Vologda memorial stone, “We love. We remember. We mourn,” or, on the Sandarmokh monument, “People, do not kill each other”) and the variety of songs, legends, novels, memoirs, and historical studies, which the participants know, share, and exchange in the ritual and beyond it.\(^{24}\) Since Emil Durkheim, rituals have been known to be the

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24. As an anonymous reviewer mentioned in an apt example, these two types of texts are as different as the inscription on Falconet’s monument to Peter I in St. Petersburg and Aleksandr Pushkin’s poem, Mednyi vsadnik. Both types of inscriptions are crucial for the life of the monument and some cases demonstrate the continuous character of this
means of religious and political instruction. Mourning rituals that integrate monuments, texts, and performative acts are indispensable mechanisms of cultural memory.

Sociological polls tell us that the denial of the catastrophe, which was practiced by the Soviet regime, is not popular in post-Soviet Russia. In 2007, Dina Khapaeva and Nikolai Koposov polled standard samples in St. Petersburg, Kazan, and Ulianovsk. They report that 91.6 percent of Russians agree that “repressions” did take place in 1937 and 63.5 percent correctly believe that “tens of millions of victims” suffered from these “repressions.”Leonid Byzov from the Russian Center of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) polled a national sample about what happened in 1937. Approximately half of the respondents mentioned repressions; the other half remembered nothing. According to this poll, about 20.1 percent of Russians recalled that their relatives were in the gulag. The majority of young Russians support the construction of monuments to these victims.

American sociologists Sarah H. Mendelson and Theodor P. Gerber sponsored a series of polls in Russia from 2003 to 2005. In this survey, about 26 percent of young respondents reported that they had at least one relative who was “repressed” during the Soviet period.

If one compares these sociological results with the current evaluations of the number of Soviet victims by historians, the conclusion is that popular estimates are either close to those given by historians or even overstated. Yet Russian and foreign scholars tend to grumble about the condition of memory in contemporary Russia. Many speculate about collective nostalgia, cultural amnesia, or notice the “cold” character of memory of the Soviet terror.


ambivalent attitudes of a people who remember the Soviet terror well but are split in their interpretation of this memory. About half of Russians explain the Soviet terror as an exaggerated but rational response to actual problems that confronted the country. Many believe that the terror was necessary for the survival of the nation, its modernization, victory in the war, and so on. I call this view the sacrificial interpretation of terror. By ascribing meaning to mass murders, this operation converts victims into sacrifices and suicidal perpetrators into cruel but sensible strategists. Sociological polls reflect the massive reach of this interpretation. About half of Khapaeva’s respondents believe that repressions were caused by the demands of modernization; that the Soviet period had a positive impact on Russian culture and morality; and that Stalin was a great man. But 72 percent of Byzov’s respondents do not want a new Stalin to come.

Dying Bewildered

Decades ago, the French-Russian historian Mikhail Geller introduced the first edition of Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Kolyma tales) with a strong statement: “Kolyma is a twin of Hitler’s death camps. But it is also different. . . . The difference is that in Hitler’s death camps, victims knew why they were killed. . . . Those who died in the Kolyma or other Soviet camps, died bewildered.”

30 The Nazi practices followed their Nazi theories more consistently than the Soviet practices followed the Soviet theories. Most of those whom the Nazis believed to be Jews agreed that they were Jews. Most of those whom the Bolsheviks believed to be wreckers did not agree that they were wreckers; moreover, they probably also hated “wreckers.” From the Jewish point of view, being a Jew was not a crime; the Nazi victims’ feelings were evidently different from the feelings of the Soviet victims. In Soviet camps, the typical victim often accepted the general principles of his perpetrators but believed that in his personal case, he was mistakenly identified. In Nazi camps, on the other hand, the typical victim did not question his identification (as a Jew) but objected to the general reasons for his persecution. These are two deeply different sentiments. Their consequences were also different: a strong and coherent antifascist and Zionist movement in one case and a disordered panoply of loyalty, neutrality, and resistance to the Soviet state, in the other.

In his pioneering portrait of a prisoner, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn presented Ivan Denisovich, a shrewd Jack-of-all-trades, whose folksy vitality enabled him to endure the gulag. Shalamov described his characters as semi-corpses whose suffering from hunger, labor, and humiliation deprives them of any decency or hope. In the Soviet camps, these people

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were called *fitili* (literally, “wicks”) and *dokhodiagi* (soon-to-be-dead); in Auschwitz, they were, curiously, called *Muselmann* (muslims). They had little chance of survival, and because of that, they did not bear witness. By all accounts, the soon-to-be-dead constituted a large part of the prisoners; since the Soviet camps did not practice the Nazi procedures of “selection,” which eliminated the sick and weak, many of those who perished in the gulag spent their last weeks and months as the soon-to-be-dead. Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov distrusted one another because they introduced the world of the gulag from two opposing perspectives, of a survivor and a soon-to-be-dead.\(^{31}\) In his analysis of the memoirs of the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, Agamben noticed that the victims bear witness only rarely. Survivors write memoirs, not victims. Survivors occupy the memory of the camps.\(^{32}\) Shalamov is one of the rare cases of a soon-to-be-dead who, for no particular reason, was saved by a camp doctor.

There are several ways to make sense of the gulag experience. The functional argument speculates that terror was instrumental for the state, and therefore, those who understood its stately function and collaborated with the state were heroes. The survival argument proposes that survival in the gulag required rare human qualities, and therefore, those who survived the gulag were heroes. The witness argument posits that the survivors’ task was to tell the truth about the gulag, and therefore, those who survived in order to bear witness were heroes. While Solzhenitsyn presented his experience of survival as a moral lesson for mankind, Shalamov denied any value in the gulag experience and decried the vanity of survival. Individual survival could be accidental or it could be earned by skills and tricks like those that Ivan Denisovich demonstrated; for Shalamov, survival was as senseless as the whole system of the gulag. In his story “Tishina,” Shalamov shows deliberately variegated people (generals, kolkhoz members, religious sectarians, and so on), all of whom are the soon-to-be-dead. They are alive mainly because they have no energy to die; when they, accidentally, receive a full lunch, the strongest of them, the sectarian, flees to his death. The very form of Shalamov’s literary work, his hatred of what he called “belletrization,” the seeming lack of organization in his *Kolyma Tales*, exemplifies his refusal to inscribe meaning into suffering.\(^{33}\) Shalamov’s characters are not heroes or martyrs; they are victims who are sometimes endowed with a rare understanding of their fate. These characters are “radical stoics,” as Benjamin described characters in the baroque “mourning plays.” In Benjamin’s analysis, which was inspired by Carl Schmitt, these characters respond to the external state of emergency with “the stoic technique” that “aims to establish a corresponding

fortification against the state of emergency in the soul.” They are “anti-
historical creation[s],” these radical stoics, because to give up this last de-
fense and to interiorize the meaning of emergency implies complicity with
the terror.\textsuperscript{34} Shalamov’s stories erected that very “fortification against
the state of emergency” in his soul, and more generally, in Russian memory.
In his remarkable letter to Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov admired the story of
Ivan Denisovich but objected to a cat that was mentioned in this story:
there were no cats in camps, wrote Shalamov, since they were eaten.\textsuperscript{35} In
one of his stories, the narrator compares himself to a horse and specu-
lates that a horse would not survive what he survives. This narrator saw no
more meaning in his labor than a horse would; strikingly, Shalamov did
not try to find consolation in his authorship either. Primo Levi wrote that
he wanted to survive in Auschwitz so that he could bear witness; Shalamov
never said this. Shalamov’s life after the gulag was not much different
from his life in it; he was writing anyway. Having survived three terms in
the gulag and, between and after these terms, many years of Soviet life,
Shalamov died in an elite retirement house in Moscow in 1982. To one
visitor, this facility looked like Shalamov’s home in the gulag: “the smell
of urine, dirt, and rot . . . a huge broad corridor and on its vinyl floor,
entirely helpless people were crawling.”\textsuperscript{36} Deaf, convulsing, and delusory,
Shalamov was one of those people; still, he was composing poems. The
monument on Shalamov’s grave was vandalized in 2002; robbers removed
his bronze head from the granite pedestal. However, the house in Vologda
where he was born is now a museum.

Affirming his sovereignty by creating zones of exception, the sover-
eign denies responsibility for the abuses committed in these zones. But
with the passing of time, and with the scale of the abuses revealed, the
sovereign changes his strategy. His last resource is a sacrificial inter-
pretation, which presents victims as sacrifices. In the post-Soviet situation, this
strategy demonstrates several dimensions. Psychologically, it responds to
the descendants’ desperate need to find meaning in their losses. Morally,
it amounts to the normalization of the terror that killed millions. His-
torically, it requires the more or less sophisticated service of hired profes-
sionals who are paid to produce a smooth narrative of a false and tragic
variety. Politically, it allows for the continuity of the state. An alternative
solution to the conundrum of post-Soviet memory is the recognition of
the “unjustified” (Khrushchev) and “senseless” (Shalamov) nature of the
terror. This is a difficult strategy; not for nothing was Shalamov accused
of nihilism.\textsuperscript{37} I would instead see his position as existentialist. Keeping the

\textsuperscript{34} Benjamin, \textit{Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 73–74.
\textsuperscript{35} For an interesting analysis, see E. Mikhailik, “Kot, begushchii mezhdut Solzhenit-
\textsuperscript{36} Tatiana Leonova, “Shalamov: Put’ v bessmertie” (recorded by O. Isaeva), \textit{Novyi
\textsuperscript{37} Georges Nivat, \textit{Solzhenitsyn} (London, 1984), 62. For an important distinction be-
tween “canonical testimonies,” which are dominated by Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov, and
“belated memoirs,” which inscribe themselves into this canonical context and confront an
anxiety of influence, see Leona Toker, “Belated GULAG Memoirs: Amending Contexts?”
catastrophe senseless is historically true but emotionally dangerous. Often, though not invariably, this work of memory produces monsters.

The Post-Soviet Uncanny

The circular time of post-traumatic experience uneasily conflates with the linear time of history. Though losses may be massive, mourning is personal; collective rituals and cultural artifacts are critical for the process of mourning, however. By sharing sorrow with the community, burial rituals prevent mourning from developing into melancholy. Crystals of memory, monuments keep the uncanny where it belongs—in the grave. The anthropologist Katherine Verdery asserts that “in many human communities, to set up right relations between living human communities and their ancestors depends critically on proper burials.” Though it is never easy to learn which relations are “right,” wrong relations are universally believed to be unfair to the dead and dangerous to the living. “Because the living not only mourn their dead but also fear them as sources of possible harm, . . . various parts of the funeral ritual . . . aim specifically to prevent a disgruntled soul from coming back.” In the post-Soviet economics of memory, where the losses are massive and the monuments in short supply, the dead return as the undead. Innocent victims can turn into uncanny monsters.

The ex-prisoner Veniamin Iofe wrote that to survive in a Soviet camp was to experience a symbolic death that always threatened to become real. Every personal survival was a return from the land of the dead. To Iofe, the collective post-Soviet transition was something similar; he imagined the whole nation returning to new life from a state of frozen nonbeing. Post-traumatic culture works in repetitive, vacillating movements that simultaneously reconstruct the shock of the past, as it supposedly happened, and defamiliarize it in such a way that the new returns of this past take different, and therefore engaging, forms. In the individual psyche as depicted by Freud, the repressed returns as the uncanny in a repetitive, compulsive way. Culture also allows the repressed to recur in uncanny forms; however, these forms need a permanent reshaping and refreshment. The cultural return of the repressed is accompanied by a defamiliarization of the past. I believe that post-Soviet memory can be productively situated at the crossroads of these two concepts, one of which is rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis and another, in Russian formalism.

The post-Soviet uncanny is profuse, but it has barely been noticed

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38. For a theoretical discussion of temporality of collective trauma, see Jenny Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), chap. 2.
40. Iofe, Granitsy smysla, 26.
by critics and scholars. In one of the most hermetic novels of its time, Iurii Mamleev’s *Shatuny* (Vagrants, 1988), the gloomy central character, Fedor Sonnov, is able to talk only to corpses, preferably to those whom he has killed himself. He is not interested in women, work, or anything but the dead. The random murder of a student with whose corpse he establishes an inspired, sublime dialogue provides the pinnacle of his life. In the same dacha community, a Soviet-style intellectual is dying; after his death, or instead of it, this professor is transformed into a half-chicken, half-human monster whom other characters call *kuro-trup* (chicken-corpse). Written with multiple allusions to Andrei Belyi and Konstantin Vaginov, this strange fiction was one of the first exemplars of the emerging genre. Mamleev’s enemies labeled this genre necrophilic, not without reason; more sympathetic readers saw in *Shatuny* the advent of Russian postmodernism.

The son of a professor of psychiatry who died in the gulag, Mamleev emigrated to the United States in 1975, and he claims to have taught Russian literature at Cornell University. He wrote *Shatuny* in Paris but now lives in Russia, where he is particularly close to Aleksandr Dugin, the leader of the pro-Kremlin Eurasian movement. In his comment on *Shatuny*, Dugin wrote that Sonnov “uses the soul of every victim as a streetcar that brings him to the afterworld” and that he represents “the uncanny truth” about “the Russian people, who are pregnant with metaphysical rebellion.” Sonnov’s “uncanny truth” probably concerns the enormity of the Soviet losses; his compulsive desire to talk to the dead is, simply, a Hamlet-like obsession with parental spirits. To be sure, Mamleev’s eerie, semiconscious version of mourning is fundamentally different from the factual, righteous account of the past exemplified by Solzhenitsyn. This difference is similar to one between a documentary film that represents a catastrophe by reconstructing its facts, scale, and causes, and a horror movie that reenacts a trauma, distorting all its features but actualizing the most important one, its horror.


44. Analytically, this difference is close to the distinction between “acting out” and “working through” the trauma, as described by LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 141. For an inspiring analysis of horror films in relation to national traumas in five cul-
In contrast to the bizarre and almost unreadable Mamleev, the younger Viktor Pelevin is highly successful in Russia and abroad. In Pelevin's Sviaschennaia kniga oborotnitsa (The sacred book of the werefox, 2004), characters are werewolves; in Ampir V (Empire V, 2006), vampires. In Sviaschennaia kniga, the narrator is an immortal fox who can turn into a woman at will. Working as a prostitute in Moscow, she meets a werewolf who works there as a general of the secret police. Shaken by love, the vigorous wolf is reduced to a dog; at this moment we learn that this general's name is actually Sharikov (the name of the semi-dog, semi-human character of Bulgakov's Sobachie serdtse). From time to time, General Sharikov travels to the north, where he growsl at the exhausted oil wells in the abandoned camps, begging them to produce oil.45

The subtitle of Pelevin's Empire V is “A Story about a Real Superman,” which alludes to both Friedrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and Boris Polevoi’s “Povest’ o nastoiashchem cheloveke” (A story about a real man, 1946), a Soviet classic. The narrator is a young Muscovite, Roman/Rama, whom vampires prepare for the role of a demonic post-Soviet ruler. In contrast to ancient vampires who sucked humans’ blood, modern vampires are dairy farmers who milk their cattle, humans, for the elixir called “bablos” (Pelevin derives this term from a slang word meaning money and whores). Initiated by a bite of his predecessor, Rama learns two arts of power, “glamour” and “discourse.” At times turning into a bat, at times presiding over a meeting of oligarchs who collect the tribute from humans and pass it to vampires, Rama is confused. However, he finds consoliation in the idea that his new vampiric identity is no more surprising than his earlier transfiguration from a Soviet child into a post-Soviet man: “It was really strange when the epoch ended but the people stayed where they were . . . The world became entirely different. There was something insane [umopomrachitel’noe] in it.”46 Quoting from Bram Stoker and paraphrasing Franco Moretti, characters discuss the vampiric nature of money in terms that sound unmistakably Marxist.47 Unfortunately, this language helps vampires establish their power over humans but does not help humans banish vampires.

Pelevin’s swinging between werewolves and vampires is understandable. In Slavic folklore, dogs, wolves, and werewolves were believed to be the worst enemies of vampires. The unburied turns into a vampire unless

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45. The variations on these themes are many. In Iuz Aleshkovskii’s Kenguru (Moscow, 2000), Stalinist prosecutors accuse the protagonist of raping a kangaroo and in the process, turn him into a kangaroo. Pavel Krusanov’s Ukus angela (St. Petersburg, 2000) presents an alternative history of the victorious Russian empire with a dictator of Russo-Chinese blood, a panoply of mages and miracles, a recognizable satire on “political technologists” of Putin’s era, and a cannibalistic hermaphrodite to boot.

46. Viktor Pelevin, Empire “V” (Moscow, 2006), 208.

47. Reference to Count Dracula ibid., 352; the affinity between money and vampires was the subject of the classical study by Franco Moretti, “The Dialectic of Fear,” New Left Review, 1/136 (November–December 1982): 67–85.
he or she is eaten by wolves. Despite Shalamov’s remark that stories of the gulag have no realistic place for animals, dogs play a strangely large part in its cultural memory. One of the early realistic narratives of the gulag, Vernyi Ruslan by Georgii Vladimov (Faithful Ruslan, 1975), focuses on a guard dog who is a more reliable witness than either the prisoners or their jailors. The popular Vladimir Vysotskii, who celebrated the collective voice of ex-prisoners, presented himself as a trapped wolf in one of his famous songs “Ohkota na volkov.” Finally, of course, one thinks about the recent campaign against corruption among Russian police officers, in which the implicated were called, publicly and officially, werewolves (oborotni). The strange success of the Russian artist Oleg Kulik who plays a barking and biting dog in his performances, can be understood in light of these connections.

Turning from zoomorphic to historicist to mystical metaphors, Pelevin’s writing has been invariably marked by post-Soviet themes. In Zhizn’ nas-eomykh (The life of insects, 1993), Pelevin’s human insects sound like the confused Soviets who were moving into the new era; in Ampir V, his Muscovite vampires appear as an ambitious but still awkward elite. In his early essay “Comparative Anthropology,” Pelevin interpreted the Soviet experience as Zombiefication. Basing his ideas on The Serpent and the Rainbow by Wade Davis (1985), Pelevin describes how Haitian secret societies converted humans into zombies by kidnapping them, beating them to death, burying them out the next day, and selling them as farmhands to plantation owners. Since they passed through symbolic death and revival, the zombies were undead; so were those who passed through Soviet life, speculated Pelevin. He imagines a person who, “after reading some brochures,” initiates perestroika in a typical Soviet town but falls “into the incomprehensible pit. There are half-rotten logs, skeletons of horses and humans, pieces of ceramics and ruined metal around. He is in the grave.” He is a zombie who returns to the grave from which he came. A Soviet town rests on the remains of a camp: try to change it—and you are pulled into the gulag below. Its population is zombifi ed. “Many zombies were members of the Soviet Union of Writers and therefore, zombies were described from the inside as well as from the outside.”

Forty years earlier, Shalamov questioned the use of what he called “satire” and “the grotesque” in the literature about the camps. Shalamov detected experiments with these forms in the early work of Andrei Sinia-

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48. “Wolves are the natural enemies of revenants . . . and tear them up wherever they find them.” Paul Barber, Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality (New Haven, 1988), 93. Basing his speculation on astrological teachings and paintings by Albrecht Dürer, Benjamin wrote that melancholy has a particular connection to dogs and stones. Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 152, 154. For a history of werewolves, see Giorgio Agamben, The Open: Man and Animal, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, 2004).

49. Oleg Kulik was Vladimir Sorokin’s coauthor on certain projects. For analysis of this post-Soviet artist-dog, see Mikhail Ryklin, “Pedigree Pal: Put’ k angliskomu dogu,” Vremia diagnoza (Moscow, 2003), 264–77.

Slavist and Iulii Daniel’ in 1966. These writers were then on trial for publishing their work abroad. In a letter to a fellow ex-prisoner, Shalamov wrote that “our experience entirely excludes the use of the genres of the grotesque or the fantastic. But neither Siniavskii nor Daniel’ has seen those rivers of blood that we saw. They can use the grotesque and the fantastic of course.”

For Shalamov, this new style was a result of inexperience. Though Siniavskii continued his work with history, satire, and magic well after he received his personal experience of the camps, there may be a kernel of truth in Shalamov’s statement. The next generation of writers, who have never seen the camps themselves, have been increasingly engaged in “the grotesque.” It seems important that in a recent piece of literary (self-)criticism, Bykov drew his genealogy of the post-Soviet authors from Siniavskii rather than from Shalamov. Because he had direct experience of the camps but incorporates magic into his narratives, Siniavskii stands as a seminal figure for Bykov, Pelevin, and others.

Magical Historicism

From the start, the cultural representation of the gulag has been imbued with strange creatures. Everyone remembers the amazing start of Solzhenitsyn’s The Gulag Archipelago, the story of a delicious frozen monster, a prehistoric triton (a salamander in the English translation by Thomas P. Whitney), that is devoured by the prisoners. With the help of this triton, Solzhenitsyn presents the mission of his great book in strikingly ambivalent words. He wishes to render the camp not “as a nightmare to be cursed” but “as a monstrous world” to be “almost” loved; he hopes to bring this world to the startled reader “like the bones and flesh of that salamander which is still, incidentally, alive.” The mythological Triton has a man’s head, a fish’s tail, and a conch shell to raise storms, as Solzhenitsyn did. As an oceanic beast, Triton is, I would add, a distant relative of the Leviathan.

In 1945, Anna Akhmatova wrote a prophetic poem, “There are three ages to memories.” With the passing of time, human memory defamil-


iarizes the dead who become alien and frightening; this third, shameful stage of memory is the bitterest.

И нет уже свидетелей событий,
И не с кем плакать, не с кем вспоминать.
И медленно от нас уходят тени,
Которых мы уже не призываем,
Возврат которых был бы страшен нам . . .
И вот когда горячайшее приходит:
Мы сознаем, что не могли бы вмести
То прошлое в границы нашей жизни, . . .
Что тех, кто умер, мы бы не узнали.

And there are no remaining witnesses to the events,
And no one to weep with, no one to remember with.
And slowly the shades withdraw from us,
Shades we no longer call back,
Whose return would be too terrible for us . . .
And then it is that bitterness wells up:
We realize that we couldn't have fit
That past into boundaries of our life . . .
That those who died we would not recognize.54

Akhmatova predicted important lines in the development of Russian memory: “I’d like to name them all by name, But the list has been confiscated . . . And if ever in this country They decide to erect a monument to me,”55 Akhmatova speaks about this monument not metaphorically (text as a monument) but literally, as a manmade monument that would, hopefully, be erected in her memory. She does not specify any feature of this monument but its location: “Here,” in a Leningrad prison, Kresty. This is an essential feature of the postcatastrophic monument: it does not have a visual concreteness, since any such concreteness would reduce the catastrophic experience to a human routine; it memorializes the fact and location of the catastrophe. But, as Akhmatova foresaw in the contemporaneous Poema bez geroia, another and very different image will accompany her memory:

И на зов этот издалека
Вдруг откликнется страшный звук—
Клокотание, стоны и клекот . . .

And from afar, responding to this appeal,
Come the terrible sounds—
Of gurgling, groans and screams . . .56

56. Akhmatova, Sobranie sochinenii, 3:10, and Anna Akhmatova, “Poem without a
The theme of uncanny, otherworldly beasts is certainly not unknown to Russian literature. One easily remembers zadumchivyi vampir (a thoughtful vampire) in Evgenii Onegin, Mikhail Lermontov’s and Mikhail Vrubel’s Demon, Nikolai Gogol’s horrifying visions, and Aleksandr Blok’s vampirstvennyi vek (vampiric century).57 Vampire stories were popular in the gulag. In Shalamov’s story “Zaklinatel’ zmei” (Snake charmer, 1954), prisoners force a fellow prisoner, Platonov, to entertain them with “stories.” Platonov’s favorite was “Count Dracula,” but prisoners preferred Russian pulp fiction.58 This is how Shalamov saw the Soviet writer: as a snake charmer, a magician who mesmerizes the public because, if he fails to do so, the public will beat him to death.

In the twenty-first century, the new generation of post-Soviet writers have produced a variety of strange animals, monsters, and modified humans. Though the fantasy of fashionable post-Soviet authors such as Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Sharov, and Bykov seems unlimited, their actual themes overlap. They seem to be mostly interested in two areas of human experience—religion and history—which they combine in rich and shocking ways. At the same time, they are not concerned about Hero,” The Complete Poems, 2:443. In this passage, one can see a reference to Nikolai Gumilev’s poem “Zmei,” which depicts an oriental dragon who hunts Russian girls and produces “Mernyi klekot.” Carl R. Proffer translates klekot as “screaming”; Nancy Anderson translates the term as “shrieking cries”; and Lenor Mayhew and William McNaughton choose “shrieks.” D. M. Thomas translated the line as “A clicking in the throat, a rattle.” Translators struggled to convey the monstrous nature of those ghosts of memory whom Akhmatova addressed here. A. Akhmatova, Selected Poems, ed. Walter Arndt, Robin Kemball, and Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor, 1976), 156; Anna Akhmatova, The Word That Causes Death’s Defeat: Poems of Memory, trans. Nancy K. Anderson (New Haven, 2004), 168; Akhmatova, Poem Without a Hero and Selected Poems, trans. L. Mayhew (Oberlin, Ohio, 1989), 135; Akhmatova, Poems, trans. D. M. Thomas (New York, 2006), 224. For demonic allusions in “Poema bez geroia,” see R. D. Timenchik, V. N. Toporov, and T. V. Tsivian, “Akhmatova i Kuzmin,” Russian Literature 6, no. 3 (1978); Roman Timenchik, “Portret vladyki mraka v ’Poeme bez geroia. ,” Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, no. 52 (2001).


58. The name of this storyteller, Andrei Fedorovich Platonov, resembles the name of a Soviet writer whom Shalamov probably read or knew, Andrei Platonovich Platonov. “I loved Platonov,” writes Shalamov; his tale reads like an obituary of this author. Shalamov, Kolymskie rasskazy, 124.
Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction

other areas of literary interest, such as psychology or realistic analysis of social issues. The religion that they explore is sometimes Christian and sometimes not, but it is never Orthodox and usually does not belong to any known organized religion or confession. Invariably, it is saturated with noncanonical magic. The historical periods that interest these writers are less variegated and focus, almost always, on the Soviet experience and its aftermath. These are stories about werewolves and vampires; about sectarians who copulate with the soil and biophilologists who clone the great Russian writers to extract the substance of immortality (Sorokin’s Goluboe salo [Blue fat, 1999]); about the war between the Vikings (Russian-Nordic bureaucrats and warriors) and the Khazars (Russian-Jewish liberals and businessmen) that unavoidably occurs after the collapse of oil prices (Bykov’s ZhD, 2006); about the restoration of the monarchy, public executions, and oprichnina in twenty-first century Russia (Sorokin’s Den’ oprichnika [Oprichnik’s Day, 2006]).

These stories have little in common with “science fiction” even in the broadest understanding of this term; with the exception of history, which they scrutinize in their unique ways, these narratives are not concerned with knowledge and technology. They do not belong to “popular literature,” as experts define it. Yet these writers are successful among Russian readers. They publish their novels with mainstream commercial publishers, produce literary scandals, and receive national prizes. To be sure, their commercial success depends upon the content of their novels, which responds to the unarticulated expectations of the audience and shapes these expectations. In recent years, “vampiric” and “demonic” themes have also proliferated in popular culture.

A theoretical approach to these narratives can be found in a seemingly distant paradigm Benjamin created in his writings on mourning plays, baroque dramas of sorrow and mystery. Like Freud’s study of the work of mourning (Trauerarbeit), Benjamin’s study of the play of mourning (Trauerspiel) combines factual observations and the personal project of mourning.

59. For thoughtful readings of some of these authors, see Edith W. Clowes, Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia (Princeton, 1993); Andrew Baruch Wachtel, Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe (Chicago, 2005); Mark N. Lipovetskii, Paralogi: Transformatii (post)-modernistskogo diskursa v russkoi kulture 1920–2000-kh godov (Moscow, 2008). For a review of the latest trend in Russian fiction, which is more fearful of Russia’s future than of its past, see Aleksandr Chantsev, “Fabrika antiutopii: Distopicheskii diskurs v rossiiskoi literature serediny 2000-kh,” Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, no. 86 (2007).

60. For such understanding, see Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions (London, 2005).

61. Sergei Sobolev compiled an interesting catalogue of Russian fiction of a genre he calls “alternative history”; many of these novels have been written in the post-Soviet decades and are “magical”; see S. V. Sobolev, Alternativnaia istoria (Lipetsk, 2006); see also Dmitrii Bykov, “Drugoi alternativy u nas est’!” Vnesto zhizni (Moscow, 2006). Many films of the last decade, such as Nochnoi dozor by Timur Bekmambetov (2004), 4 by Vladimir Sorokin and II’a Khryzhanovskii (2005), and Zhivot by Aleksandr Veledinskii (2006) experiment with various combinations of the occult and the political. For a view of post-Soviet popular culture that emphasizes themes of sex and violence rather than history and magic, see Eliot Borenstein, Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture (Ithaca, 2008).
“The laws which govern Trauerspiel are to be found . . . at the heart of mourning”; this genre is “the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of a melancholy man,” wrote Benjamin. Like Weimar culture, mourning plays were “haunted by the idea of the catastrophe” but fought against the “historical ideal of the restoration.” Though mourning plays caricatured classical tragedy, they produced the same effects, fear and pity, that Aristotle attributed to tragedy; but they were so “offensive or even barbaric to refined taste” that they were said to be “written by brutes for brutes.”

Ghostly apparitions and dream visions permanently occur in these dramas, which substitute the tragic deus ex machina with specters who come from the grave. Only as corpses can their characters “enter the homeland of allegory,” which is the domain of the undead. If in tragedy death is the “ever immanent reality,” in mourning plays death “frequently takes the form of communal fate, as if summoning all the participants before the highest court”; this is why mourning plays have no end. For Benjamin, allegory is not mere “illustrative technique” but “a form of expression,” sometimes the only form that is culturally or politically available.

Developing these ideas, Jacques Derrida associated the ghostly visions of contemporary culture with the idea of justice: “this being with specters would also be . . . a politics of memory . . . If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, . . . it is in the name of justice.” Evidently, this idea of justice becomes relevant when the worldly courts deny hope; in a similar way, allegories bloom when other ways of constructing truth and memory betray the storyteller. The baroque and expressionism are separated by centuries, but in Benjamin’s vision, these cultural epochs shared “unremitting artistic will,” a “characteristic feeling of dizziness,” and “a desire for new pathos.” The genre of the mourning play still has a future, Ben-

62. Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 139.
63. Ibid., 66.
64. Ibid., 53.
65. Ibid., 134.
66. Ibid., 135–36.
jamin predicted. Today, his work on the *Trauerspiel* helps us read the new Russian cultural scene through a triple allegory that integrates different melancholic epochs—the baroque, Weimar, and the post-Soviet.

In *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (Marina’s thirtieth love, 1999), Sorokin draws an ironic picture of a young Muscovite who vacillates in her commitment to political dissidents and Soviet true-believers. Marina’s loves, male and female, defy novelistic convention by their very multitude. Like other post-Soviet novels, this is a story of a community rather than an individual. In her dissident stage, Marina imagines underground Moscow in a typically post-Soviet manner: “Under Stalin’s skyscrapers, under the puppet-like Kremlin, under modern constructions lie the pressed bones of millions of the tortured, murdered by the scary machinery of the gulag. . . . Nothing has changed here. It seemed that time ossified or maybe was canceled by decree. The hands of the Kremlin chimes turn in vain, like a windup doll without a spring.”

Paradoxically, since there are so few monuments on the former sites of the gulag, these sites are imagined to be everywhere. In her search for truth and love, Marina spins around in vain, like a windup doll, and re-shapes herself into a Soviet specter when her thirtieth love, a communist leader, manages to bring her to her first orgasm but traps her mind in Soviet discourse. This erotic novel effectively predicted the political events of the subsequent decade. History folds here into a cursed, spectral loop, like in the mourning play that features a particular conception of time which is repetitive rather than “fulfilled” and “spectral, not mythic.” In Sorokin’s *Led* (Ice, 2002), the characters are born-again rather than undead. People of the Ice produce their fellowship by hammering humans with sacred Ice. A few are fully transformed, but many more are killed in the process. The People of the Ice make their way into the core of the KGB and exploit the system for their benefit. In its own way, Sorokin’s fantasy responds to the same desperate quest for meaning that inspired Bykov’s *Justification*. The People of the Ice do not look like animals, do not suck blood (in fact, they are vegetarians), and are mortal. Like vampires, however, they are parasites on humans, whom they use with the utmost cruelty. These mystics produce their alternative history in intonations that are reminiscent of some Russian religious narratives, starting from Avvakum. Performing sacral manipulations on human bodies, the People of the Ice strive to reach a magic number of their fellowship, which will bring about the desired end of the world. This construction (managing an apocalypse by mutilating a target number of men and women) is probably taken from the central myth of the Skoptsy sect. Like many of their his-

70. Ibid., 113.
71. Vladimir Sorokin, *Tridtsataia liubov' Mariny* (Moscow, 1999), 122.
73. Sects were at the center of Andrei Siniavskii’s version of Russian cultural history, published as *Ivan-Durak* (Paris, 1991). A Skopets was a character in Iurii Mamleev’s *Shatuny* (Paris, 1988). Russian sects have also been important for Aleksandr Dugin’s philosophical speculations. Aleksei Ivanov’s *Zoloto bunta* (St. Petersburg, 2005) describes the fight be-
torical predecessors, Sorokin’s characters struggle to overcome history but inevitably return to it. Quite recently, several Slavic scholars argued that the concept of magical realism can be applied to east European literatures that have been recently emancipated from Soviet domination and are arguably postcolonial; examples were the late Soviet works of non-Russian writers, the Kirgiz Chingiz Aitmatov and the Abkhazian Fasil Iskander, for example, as well as post-Soviet Ukrainian literature. Coined in Weimar Germany and then applied to Latin American and African fiction, the concept of magical realism made a huge loop before it arrived in the post-Soviet space. Salman Rushdie famously described magical realism as “the commingling of the improbable and the mundane.” Improbable as they are, Sorokin’s, Sharov’s, or Bykov’s novels do not have much of what could be plausibly characterized as mundane. Although they entail plenty of magic, to deem them “realistic” would be plainly wrong.

I believe that the application of the concept of magical realism to post-Soviet Russian fiction requires a major theoretical revision. Contemporary Russian narratives are similar to and different from magical realist ones in several important respects. They are similar because they make extensive use of magic in a full-scale novelistic construction. They also present an implicit critique of contemporary society by revising its historical foundations. They are different because they are self-consciously distanced from the traditions of the realist novel that are critical to magical realism. The post-Soviet novel does not emulate social reality and does not compete with the psychological novel; what it emulates and struggles with, is history. I believe that a reasonable description for this particular trend in post-Soviet literature is magical historicism.

Michael Wood distinguishes between two kinds of magical realism, one that is magic in its material and realist in its style (when “fantasy was represented by the deadest of deadpans, as if the author were reciting a telephone book”), and another that is realist in material and magical in style (when “the facts are the facts, but they are given to us as if they are fables”). Wood seems to be mostly interested in the first kind of narratives, which he suggests are written as if the reporter is sober and re-

ween Old Believer communities over the treasure that the eighteenth-century Emîl’ian Pugachev allegedly left before his arrest. In Pavel Krusanov’s Ùkus angela: Roman (St. Petersburg, 2000), the wandering Old Believer inspires the emerging dictator by citing Freud and Johann Jakob Bachofen. For the role of sectarian themes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian literature and thought, see Aleksandr Etkind, Khlyst: Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiya (Moscow, 1998). The reawakening of sectarian themes in post-Soviet literature deserves a special study.


The anthropologist Michael Taussig explores the connection between the internationally renowned prose of magical realists and native practices of healing and sorcery; he concludes that the literary elaborations of popular magic stand as a counterhegemonic force that is capable of confronting the usage to which the church and, sometimes, the backward-looking official culture put the remains of native religion. Famous Latin American examples such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which clearly belong to Wood's first kind of magical realism, deconstruct nationalist historiographies by impartially telling the fantastic stories of the past, as if the history were drunk but the historian sober. Recruiting popular magic and multiplying its use in the most unbridled ways, these stories disavow the official narrative of the people's suffering in the past as necessary, justifiable sacrifices for the sake of the people's present. Projecting magic into history, these novels subvert scholarly discourses of historiography with their habitual emphasis on rational choices and social forces. These novels tend to follow some of the stylistic conventions of historical writing, such as impartiality and what Wood aptly calls sobriety. Rarely, if ever, do the narrators of these novels play Nabokovian games with their readers by actualizing the presence of the narrator in the course of the action. They boost their readers' understanding of the relational, constructed nature of the narrated reality with genealogical rather than narratological experiments.

This is where post-Soviet Russian fiction converges with that of post-colonial Latin America. In reality, there is no border between the past and the present; even less so in the realm of magic. Correspondingly, the border between magical realism and magical historicism is a matter of focus or emphasis rather than one of definitions or patrol. In the philosophical tradition, historicism strives to understand the current state of the world as the result of its development in the past. It also denies other ways of understanding the present, for example, that free will can shape the present without being predetermined by the past. Ironically, magical historicism shares a belief in the explanatory power of the past with rational versions of historicism. In Sharov's esoteric novel *Do i vo vremia* (Before and then, 1993) the eternal Madame de Staël lives in Russia, sleeps with its most important figures, from Aleksandr Skriabin to Stalin, who is also her son, and resides in a Soviet madhouse together with the phi-

79. For the recognition of the influence of Latin American “magical realist” writers on Russian authors of the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods, see Sergei Chuprinin, “Eshe raz k voprosu o kartografii vymysla,” *Znamia*, no. 11 (2006). The Russian mother of a founder of Latin American magical realism, Alejo Carpentier, and her alleged kinship to the poet Konstantin Bal'mont is a subject of musings by Russian critics. An interesting example of anxiety of influence is Bykov’s speculation that in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez in his own turn emulated “Istoriia odnogo goroda” by Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin; see Dmitrii Bykov, *Vnesto zhizni* (Moscow, 2006).
losopher Nikolai Fedorov and a covey of old Bolsheviks. While the narrator is recording the oral history of these survivors, an apocalyptic flood drowns Moscow. A trained Soviet historian who refashioned himself into a post-Soviet writer, Sharov describes his credo: “The history I learned was not the history of humans. It was the history of hectares, crops, financial flows. . . . It was entirely foreign to me. . . . I am trying to understand what the revolution was, . . . why the people who had beautiful dreams committed monstrous crimes.”  

For some readers, Sharov’s, Sorokin’s, or Pelevin’s novels give clearer answers to these questions than social history does. Michael Wood’s twin concepts of drunk reality and sober observer help us understand Sharov’s fantasy of the eternal, Russified Madame de Staël. Indeed, who could have been an impartial observer of the revolution and terror? If such an observer could be imagined, he or she would be a fantastic personality. In Before and Then, the author bothers himself with such questions and presents a complex narrative construction that consists of the anchor character, de Staël, and the first-person narrator who collects her oral history. In other types of narratives, the author simply emulates the person-less voice of a history textbook.

In melancholic visions of Sharov, Sorokin, and their colleagues, the past is perceived not just as “another country” but as an exotic and unexplored one, still pregnant with unborn alternatives and imminent miracles. Arguably, the expanded use of the subjunctive tense characterizes postrevolutionary periods. The feeling of loss opens up questions of what might have been. Possessed by the ghostly past and unable to withdraw from its repetitive contemplation, post-Soviet writers find themselves trapped in a state of melancholia. At the same time, their readers celebrate an unprecedented consumer boom but feel the loss of the political opportunities they recently enjoyed. Writing in a glossy men’s journal, the cultural critic Grigorii Revzin described the situation in political rather than clinical terms: “The past does not know the subjunctive mood only if the present does know it. . . . If the present is what you cannot change at all, the past becomes what you can change in every possible way.”

When politics does not provide alternatives, historiography offers them in abundance.

In the final account, the popularity of magical historicism among post-Soviet writers and readers realizes the “compromise by which the command of reality is carried out piecemeal” that Freud ascribed to melancholia.

81. Post-Soviet literature often plays with the idea of reincarnation. This idea is usually perceived as characteristically Buddhist; however, this idea was also central for Russian mystical sects such as the Khlysty; see Humphrey, “Stalin and the Blue Elephant,” for a fascinating analysis of reincarnation stories about Stalin, which are told by the Buddhist peoples of Russia, and Etkind, Khlyst, for the reincarnation mythology of traditional Russian sects.
The inability to differentiate oneself from the lost object prevents the individual from living in the present, from love and work. On the political level, the reverse is probably equally important: when there is no choice in the present, the historical past unfolds into an overwhelming narrative that obscures the present rather than explaining it. On the poetical level, Freud’s observation about the “piecemeal” character of the melancholic “compromise” provides a new perspective on the nature of postcatastrophic writing, which combines past and present, truth and fiction, allegories and metonymies.

History and magic are strange bedfellows. Ghosts and witches are ahistorical, but witch hunts and ghost tours embody their historical moment. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and other beasts help authors and readers discuss history that is not comprehensible by other means. Such was the Soviet period with its “unjustified repressions.” The uncanny scenery of post-Soviet literature signals the failure of other, more conventional ways of understanding social reality. It is not the pointed clarity of social and cultural criticism that attracts readers, but the inexhaustible fantasy of creators of alternative pasts. Often, the technological fantasies that authenticate these stories are manipulations of human bodies that allow for supernatural warmth and an immediacy of contact between the manipulated. After being hammered by Ice, Sorokin’s sectarians can speak to each other with their hearts. After being bitten by a vampire, Pelevin’s characters can understand other creatures, human or vampiric, by biting them. Sharov’s patients acquire similar abilities after having sex with Madame de Staël. In the post-Soviet condition, the antimodern fantasy of immediate, extralinguistic communication becomes a popular refuge. In most of these stories, immediate knowledge leads to unlimited power. They are stories of super-communes, not supermen.

Magical historicism does have critical potential. Though the political boundaries in post-Soviet Russia tend to blur, magical historicists such as Sorokin, Pelevin, Sharov, and Bykov are recognizably different from those authors who use realistic techniques to spread their pro-Soviet nostalgia, like Aleksandr Prokhanov or Maksim Kantor. In 2002, the pro-Putin youth movement Idushchie vmeste (a historicist replica of the Soviet Komsomol) publicly destroyed copies of Sorokin’s Blue Fat by disposing of them in a giant commode in the center of Moscow (the use of the commode recalling, in its own turn, Marcel Duchamp). Set in the future, Blue Fat tells the story of an elixir that the monstrous clones of great Russian writers, from Lev Tolstoi to Vladimir Nabokov, produce when writing. Through this transformation into “blue fat,” their texts provide immortality. Exotic Russian sectarians of the future steal this substance from the Russian-Chinese scientists who produce the clones. Using a time machine, sectarians send this elixir to Stalin, who is presented here as Khrushchev’s lover. At the end of the story, we see the immortal Stalin as a servant to one of the pathetic masters of the future. The final pages drop a hint that Stalin is, in fact, the narrator of the story. Changing its focus from invented communities

to pseudo-historical personalities and back to invented communities, this exemplary novel combines many features of magical historicism: unmotivated distortions of history, semi-human monsters, manipulations of the body, fantastic cults, circular time, and the resulting interpenetration of epochs. In a strange way that was, however, available to the semi-educated Idushchie vmeste, this novel sent an aggressively critical political message towards Putin’s Russia.

While dehumanization can take various forms and steps, treating humans as animals is one of them; the conversion of humans into monsters is probably the next one. Practicing senseless violence that eludes any functional interpretation, the gulag effectively reduced humans to working animals. Starting with Solzhenitsyn’s triton, Vladimov’s dog, and Shalamov’s cat, the gulag’s memory in literature has used humanized animals to tell the story of inhuman suffering. In the early attempts at realistic representation, these animals were put into the position of witnesses, more reliable ones than humans on either side of the fence. In the later spirit of magical historicism, these characters have developed into monsters that embody the horror, not the truth, of the Soviet period better than either humans or animals.  

This memorial culture is not so much postmodern as it is, precisely, post-Soviet. Many classical figures and motifs resurge here: monsters like the Sphinx, Moloch, Leviathan, and Triton; Antigone who wanted to bury her brother; Dante’s infernal adventures and Hamlet’s possession and revenge; Dracula, to be sure, and also Sharikov. But the most pertinent master-plot may be that of Little Red Riding Hood: the wolf ate the granny and now he looks like the granny—or maybe it is the murdered granny who looks like a wolf?

85. Agamben discusses the relevance of animals and zoomorphic monsters for the representation of the Nazi camps in his *The Open.*