Rewriting the Future: The Construction of Masculine Subjectivity within Articulations of Russia's Post-Soviet National Idea

Arianna L. Nowakowski

University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd

Part of the Eastern European Studies Commons, and the Gender and Sexuality Commons

Recommended Citation


This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu,dig-commons@du.edu.
REWRITING THE FUTURE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINE
SUBJECTIVITY WITHIN ARTICULATIONS OF RUSSIA’S POST-SOVIE T
NATIONAL IDEA

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Arianna L. Nowakowski
June 2012
Advisor: Dr. Jonathan Adelman
ABSTRACT

This dissertation evaluates the construction, negotiation, and contestation of masculine Subjectivity within articulations of Russia’s post-Soviet national Idea. As Russia endeavors to define itself after years of turmoil and strife, gender identities have become deeply enmeshed in understandings of quintessential Russianness. From discourses of the state under Vladimir Putin to those of the Russian Orthodox Church, actors with significant social and political power have constructed particular understandings of what it means to be Russian, and in so doing, have delineated the parameters of normal, or natural gender identities and sexualities for men.

Drawing from the ideas of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and others, I analyze the ways in which male corporeality is articulated as an embodiment of the nation, and point to the consequences of articulations that serve to “naturalize” or “normalize” certain masculinities over others. Many of the discourses under consideration have constructed a gendered conceptualization of Russia’s national Idea by mythologizing nostalgic signifiers of the past and orienting them toward a future ideal in a way that finalizes the meanings of such signifiers and makes them appear to be eternal and authentically Russian. Combined, such discourses constitute a national Idea that serves to monologize conceptions of masculinity, reducing them to an artificial essentialism. Yet perhaps most importantly, this work demonstrates the constructed and unfinalizable nature of imposed identities—and the ability, through creative discursive
mechanisms such as literature and film, to push back against the establishment and resist the centripetal forces of “traditional” modernity.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Masculine Subjectivity and the Embodiment of a Russian Ideal .................. 1

Chapter One: Masculinity as Heterotopia—Oligarchs and the Remapping of the Post-Soviet Space ................................................................. 29

Chapter Two: Vladimir Putin and the Body Politic: the Coalescence of Corporeality and Temporality in Putin’s Russia ........................................ 77

Chapter Three: In the Service of Faith—Orthodoxy and Masculinity in Russia’s Armed Forces ................................................................................ 119

Chapter Four—Performativity and the Negotiation of Masculinities in Post-Soviet Film ................................................................................... 157

Conclusion—Masculinity and Russianness in an Uncertain Future ......................... 205

Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 212
LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter Two:

1. “The Epoch of Clemency” by The Blue Noses
2. Putin on his shirtless equestrian journey across the Siberian steppes
3. Putin fishing in the Enisei River in the Republic of Tyva, Siberia
4. Putin riding a motorcycle with the “Night Wolves”
5. Putin hugging a Bulgarian shepherd dog
6. Putin feeding a baby elk at the national park “Losiny Ostrov”

Chapter Three:

1. Orthodox priest blessing the troops
2. Military-Orthodox procession

Chapter Four:

1. Piotr Mamonov and Piotr Zaitchenko in *Taxi Blues*, 1990
2. Sergei Bodrov Jr. as Danila Bagrov in *Brother*, 1997
3. The stereotypically “exotic” Ulumji in *You I Love* 2004
4. Ulumji and Timofei in *You I Love*
5. Vera, Timofei, and Ulumji in *You I Love*
INTRODUCTION

MASCULINE SUBJECTIVITY AND THE EMBODIMENT OF A RUSSIAN IDEAL

In January 2010, employing the same caustic rhetoric that had dominated his speeches for the past five years, former Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov chastised the organization of a gay pride parade in Moscow, referring to demonstrations by “minorities” as “blasphemous and satanic acts under the guise of democratic principles.”¹ He insisted that “traditional” Russian morality must be upheld, and that the rule of law must be the focus of Moscow authorities. Such sentiments have been backed by the increasingly prominent Russian Orthodox Church, which has cited immorality as a primary catalyst of Russia’s post-Soviet problems, and has predicated Russia’s future survival upon the reinstatement of Orthodox ideas and practices. Pro-Kremlin nationalist youth groups such as Nashi (Ours) and Iduschie Vmeste (Walking Together) have lambasted authors and artists whose work exhibits profanity, pornography, or otherwise morally questionable subject matter, aligning themselves instead with an increasingly conservative and semi-autocratic political apparatus. Combined with the hyper-masculinized persona of Vladimir Putin, who has been photographed practicing judo, tagging Siberian tigers, and fly fishing in all his muscular might, developments such as these demonstrate the centrality of gender—and in particular masculinity—in the construction of Russia’s post-Soviet national Idea, where the identities and sexualities of

¹ See Yurii Luzhkov calls gay parades “satanic activities” (Moscow, January 27, 2010).
men and women have become mutually constitutive of nationalistic discourses of the post-Soviet narrative.

As Helena Goscilo has pointed out, gender identities and ideas of the nation have been closely entwined in a mutually constitutive relationship throughout much of Russia’s long history—a relationship so innate that it has oftentimes been left unquestioned: “Russianness, like all national identities, is historically grounded in notions of masculinity and femininity so pervasive that until the advent of feminism they appeared both natural and incontrovertible.”\(^2\) Derived largely from traditional principles of Orthodox Christianity, the state, or Otechestvo (Fatherland) of Muscovite and Imperial Russia was defined in accordance with supposedly essentialist and God-given masculine traits such as strength, fortitude, and rationality, while the nation, or Rodina (Motherland), became characterized by characteristics such as sensitivity, tenderness, and purity. Concomitantly, social identities of men and women became reified within discourses of this gendered nation-state, the characteristics of which had come to be regarded as representing a natural and timeless social order. During most of Imperial Russia, the tsar, whose “natural” leadership capabilities were said to have been ordained by God, was often regarded as Tsar Batiushka, or the benevolent “little father” of the people. Embodying the sovereign, the tsar served as a model for individual men, who were considered to be natural-born heads of their families. As written in the Domostroi (Book of Household Management), men were instructed to punish their wives and servants “according to the extent of their guilt and the severity of their deed. Lay stripes

upon them, but, when you have punished them, forgive them.”

This discourse delineated rigid boundaries of masculine Subjectivity that were not to be transgressed. Sex was to serve procreative purposes only, and homosexual behavior, while not treated as harshly under Imperialism as during the Soviet period, was generally prohibited.

Although liberation from restrictive and paternalistic gender obligations (and from practices of Orthodoxy more broadly) was heralded as a key objective of the Bolshevik Revolution, gender during the Soviet period continued to be, as Sarah Ashwin has pointed out, a “key organising principle” of Soviet society, reciprocally constituting both the national Idea and social identities of citizens. Rather than being defined in accordance with Orthodox teachings, the nation and identities of men and women during the Soviet period were constructed in accordance with principles of communism. Gender “became the basis on which the duties of citizens to the new polity were defined,” and by stipulating the duties of citizens within this new polity, an understanding of the polity itself began to emerge. Coinciding with egalitarian Soviet principles, women were granted the right to work outside of the home, but continued to be glorified for their “natural” child-bearing capabilities. Meanwhile, the “new Soviet man” of the 1920s and 1930s was held up as both an embodiment of and the key to the Soviet state’s future.

---

3 See Carolyn Johnston Pouncy, *The Domostroi: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible*, trans. Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Although the influence of the Domostroi in Russian society would have been limited at the time due to the vast illiteracy of the predominantly peasant population, there is evidence that it was circulated amongst the upper classes, which had a direct bearing on the educational curricula and legal framework of the time.


5 Ibid. 1.
success. He was to be a heterosexual breadwinning hero—a *stakhanovite* who consistently surpassed production quotas, and whose unfailing patriotism and devotion to the Motherland would transform the Soviet Union into an international superpower.

Despite the ideological disavowal of all things Orthodox during the Soviet period, this stereotypically patriarchic social order and procreative masculine Subjectivity largely persisted until the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. As supreme leader of the Bolshevik Party and mastermind of the Revolution, Vladimir Lenin was widely regarded as the father of the Soviet people, and Josef Stalin was affectionately known as “Uncle Joe,” despite the many atrocities he committed. During much of this seventy-three year period of rapid social and economic transformation, men acquired social status through their contributions to the state. As the power of the state and the utopian ideal of a communist society assumed an unmovable disciplinary posture over the male body, men were valorized for their abilities to build a powerful Fatherland and protect the fragile, yet enduring Motherland. Their bodies were regarded as machines—as asexual automatons that were charged with both constructing and literally embodying the powerful empire that the Soviet Union would become. Particularly during the early Soviet period and at the time of the Second World War, a mutually constitutive relationship was forged between the individual and society in which the private was almost entirely subsumed by the public, rendering all matters of the individual and family subject to state scrutiny and regulation. Patriotism—the pride and dedication that citizens were expected to exemplify toward their country—was one of the most prominent ideological facets of Soviet discourse. Young men were instructed to labor tirelessly for the advancement of
communism, while defending the Motherland against enemies both foreign and domestic in every aspect of their lives.

Yet as the empire declined, so too did this seemingly inviolable masculinity: “Unlike the more traditional image of femininity, Soviet masculinity as cultural construct was built primarily on the foundation of the political utopia, and once the latter started showing signs of decay, masculinity as the icon of Soviet modernity underwent a crisis.”

The body politic had collapsed, revealing a profound lack of both national and individual identity that had always existed, but which had been masked by the illusion of stability and permanence. Although masculine Subjectivity in both pre-Soviet and Soviet Russia was by no means fixed or undisputed, particular manifestations of “normal” or “natural” masculinity had become deeply institutionalized at the expense of all others, first by discourses of the church, then by the utopian ideal of communism. Upon the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the once powerful Fatherland was said to have undergone a so-called “de-masculinization,” becoming characterized not by strength and virility, but rather by social and political fragmentation, rapid economic decline, and a profound inability to act. Divorced from its once powerful past, the new Russia was politically and economically impotent—prostituted out to Western powers, whose proclaimed ideological supremacy served only to emphasize the ineffectiveness of the humiliated former superpower. Simultaneously, the social identities Russia’s citizens—particularly those of men, who had long been touted as family breadwinners, gallant soldiers, and heroic Stakhanovites—were turned upside down. Men found themselves in a veritable

---

no-man’s land, as social expectations for them to maintain stereotypically “masculine” personas persisted, while opportunities for doing so rapidly declined. As a consequence, many men throughout the 1990s turned to excessive drug use, alcoholism, and suicide as attempts to escape their inglorious and seemingly unalterable situations.

Upon the downfall of the Soviet Union, a flood of pornographic books and magazines filled the newsstands, prostitution and violence proliferated, and casual sexual relations between young people became more commonplace and open. Women went from being glorified Soviet workers and “hero mothers” to sex objects and even prostitutes, which further confused possible and appropriate social identities for men. The inability of men to provide for their families was highlighted by the prevalence of women in the workforce, yet women’s hyper-femininity created further pressure on men to assume assertive, stereotypically masculine, identities. As the prospects of a successful transition to a democratic society began to crumble, so too did the brief period of social liberation. Rapid economic decline, widespread crime, political corruption, and a perceived deterioration of social morality contributed to Russians’ disillusionment with Western democracy. Russia’s post-Soviet “sexual revolution” was seen as a Western import—as an unfortunate accompaniment to democracy and capitalism. The nation had lost its patriarchic prowess, and with it, the ability of men to attain any semblance of self-identification and meaning. Consequently, there existed in post-Soviet Russia a desire for

---

As Eliot Borenstein points out, the influx of prostitution in the immediate post-Soviet period was analogous to Russia’s social, political, and economic climate, as well as the ways in which the state was forced to prostitute itself out to Western powers for economic support. See Eliot Borenstein, “Selling Russia: Prostitution, Masculinity, and Metaphors of Nationalism After Perestroika,” in *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 175.
both a return to the stability of Soviet times and for a unified national Idea—for a return of the patriarchal order and, in some cases, the explicitly defined gender identities that had, for better or worse, provided a means of self-identification, which people found themselves suddenly lacking.

Following the chaos and fragmentation of the 1990s, Russian president Vladimir Putin proclaimed in 2001 that “The past decade of Russia was stormy, it is possible to say without much exaggeration—revolutionary…But it is time to firmly say: that cycle has ended.”8 And indeed, after more than a decade of turmoil and disarray, Russia’s economic and political institutions have stabilized tremendously under Putin’s leadership. Russia has regained much of its prominence as an international superpower and the quality of life has improved dramatically. A middle class has emerged, which continues to push for increased rights and stability, even now posing a challenge to Putin himself. This process of national regeneration has been accomplished through the uneasy fusion of traditional discourses of Imperial and Soviet Russia, such as Orthodox Christianity and authoritarian leadership, on one hand, and elements of modernity, such as increased bureaucratization, regulation, and social control, on the other. Under Putin and his protégée, Dmitrii Medvedev, the economy has been recentralized, media enterprises renationalized, and civil society brought under the auspices of the state. The Orthodox Church—oftentimes mythologized as an enduring facet of authentic Russianness—has served as a moral compass for defining Russia’s new Idea, as well as the roles and identities of men and women in contemporary Russia.

Although such “traditional” articulations of Russianness have enabled the nation to once again be conceived of in terms of strength and unity rather than revolution and chaos, they have simultaneously served to redefine social identities, particularly those of men, in very particular and exclusionary ways. In their framing of Russian identity, political and religious discourses give rise to hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity that predominate not only over the feminine, but over other masculinities, as well. Although women continue to face discrimination, harassment, sexual violence, and the double burden of work and motherhood, the consequences of “normalized” or “naturalized” masculinities for men have been widely overlooked. Men have not necessarily been winners in the post-Soviet context: data indicate that the average life expectancy for men in contemporary Russia continues to hover around fifty-nine to sixty years, in contrast to approximately seventy-three years for women. Rates of smoking, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, and suicide tend also to be exponentially higher for men than they are for women, despite attempts that have been made, particularly by Dmitri Medvedev, to curb excessive vodka consumption. Notwithstanding significant health issues, the social ramifications of normalized masculinities for men are also profound.

Rather than allowing for the inclusion of multiple masculinities, discourses of the church and state, in their articulations of “authentic” Russianness, delineate the boundaries of a “normal,” or “natural” masculinity that is rigidly defined at the expense and exclusion of all others. Masculinity as constructed within the constellation of this

---


constructed Russian Idea not only serves as an Other against which the feminine is defined; it also positions men in either dominant or subordinate Subject positions, depending on their approximation to, in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, a “monologic” Ideal. In contemporary Russia, this Ideal has largely been predicated upon teachings of the church that are said to represent the authentic foundation of Russianness—but it also draws from mythologized symbolism of the Soviet period, such as Russia’s glorious victory in WWII. The continued discrimination against and social persecution of gay men, as well as the palpable social stigma that persists against men who opt for fatherhood or other “sensitive” careers over more “manly” options, exemplify the pervasiveness of this Ideal in Russian society. As Russia constructs a new national Idea and mutually constitutive gender identities in the contemporary period by mythologizing sentiments of the past, it could be said that the future is, in many ways, being rewritten. And this rewriting, by appealing to desires for stability, strength, and a return of the characteristics that supposedly made Russia great, constructs idealized gender identities and sexualities that are consequential for gay and straight men alike.

This dissertation evaluates the construction, negotiation, and contestation of masculine Subjectivity within articulations of Russia’s post-Soviet national Idea, and assesses the consequences for men. In this work, I consider the roles of the Russian Orthodox Church, the state under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, and Russia’s oligarchs, or criminally inclined “businessmen,” in engendering interrelated conceptions of both Russian identity and masculinity in the post-communist period. Drawing from

the ideas of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and others, I analyze the ways in which male corporeality is articulated as an embodiment of the nation, and point to the consequences, particularly for gay men, of articulations that serve to “naturalize” or “normalize” certain masculinities over others. Many of the discourses under consideration have constructed a gendered conceptualization of Russia’s national Idea by mythologizing nostalgic signifiers of the past and orienting them toward a modern future in a way that finalizes the meanings of such signifiers and makes them appear to be eternal and quintessentially Russian. Combined, this amalgam of heterogeneous yet interrelated discourses constitutes a national Idea that serves to monologize definitions of masculinity, reducing them to an artificial essentialism. Yet perhaps most importantly, this work also demonstrates the constructed and unfinalizable nature of imposed identities—and to the ability, through creative media such as literature and film, to push back against the establishment and resist the centripetal forces of “traditional” modernity.

Theorizing Masculine Subjectivity

Subjected to the oftentimes confining and determinate parameters of discourse, the masculine Subject has no predetermined essence, or center, but rather is ontologically lacking prior to its entrance into the symbolic order and its contextualization in time and space.12 As Jacques Lacan has written, “it is the world of words that creates the world of things—things originally confused in the hic et nunc of the all in the process of coming-

12 The symbolic order may be defined briefly as a “social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law…” See Dino Felluga, Terms Used by Psychoanalysis (Purdue University, 2003).
into-being.”

13 As a “social and political construction that establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing (subject) positions with which social agents can identify,” discourse establishes the knowledges and Subject positions that define particular masculinities and establishes Others against which the “normal” or “natural” masculine Subject can be defined. It constructs for the Subject a context—a meaningful history and purpose, and provides a frame of reference for navigating an otherwise unintelligible terrain. Although constructions of contemporary Subjectivities may draw from those of the past, such constructions in no way signify a predetermined progression of history, but rather a mythologizing of that history and a careful incorporation of past memories into the present (and future). In the words of Michel Foucault, “discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined…”

15 The Subject’s construction at any given time and place is highly contingent, and represents only one possibility out of potentially infinite options.

Devoid of any pre-ontological essence, social objects only acquire meaning within a chain of signification that comprises the symbolic order of discourse. Their meaning depends upon the ways in which they are “positioned” within this chain—both


in space and time, and in opposition to significant Others. Consequently, signifiers such as “masculinity” and “femininity” are not a-temporal or static, but rather acquire different meanings in different times and places. A particular national “sensibility,” to borrow Goscilo’s term, may therefore provide a context for understanding masculinity and the obligations of men, while simultaneously depending upon the repeated actions, discourses and performativity of this masculinity for its own meaning to be sustained. Yet if social objects such as masculinity only acquire meaning within a particular context and are devoid of a pre-ontological essence, where does the chain of signification stop? What is it that creates and sustains identities beyond all other possible variations? As Slavoj Žižek explains,

[T]he multitude of ‘floating signifiers’, of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain ‘nodal point’ (the Lacanian point de capiton) which ‘quilts’ them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning.16

The point de capiton, as a “master signifier,” stops the otherwise endless movement of signification and “produces the necessary illusion of fixed meaning.”17

During the Soviet period, the master signifier “communism” served as an ordering principle that partially fixed the meanings of otherwise empty signifiers such as Soviet, bourgeois, exploitation, and, of course, masculinity. It positioned the masculine Subject in space and time—against the Imperial period and in anticipation of a future Soviet utopia—as well as against bourgeois elitism and entrepreneurial aspirations of the West. Combined, the resultant Subject position served to construct a very particular conceptualization of the masculine Subject. In contemporary Russia, Orthodox


17 Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, 149.
Christianity has served such a function. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the symbolic order within which people had self-identified was thrown into disarray; there remained only a void where the illusion of unity and coherence once prevailed. As a mythologized, almost primordial element of Russia’s past, Orthodoxy has been revived as a prominent master signifier of the national Idea both past and future, and, consequently, has positioned the masculine Subject within this discourse in very specific ways.

Out of the multitudinous ways in which the masculine Subject can be constructed, particular constructions become hegemonic over all other alternatives during different times and places. If left unquestioned, such constructions become institutionalized and regarded as “normal,” or “natural”—not as constructions, but as enduring facets of everyday life. As Saul Newman points out, discursively constructed subjectivities “limit the individual to certain prescribed norms of morality and behavior,” and exclude “identities and modes of behavior which somehow do not conform to these norms.”18 Alternative masculinities are “categorized as ‘unnatural’ or ‘perverse,’ as somehow ‘other’ and they are persecuted according to the norms they transgress.”19 By becoming incorporated into the socio-political institutions in which people interact and self-identify, such constructed subjectivities serve to “centralize” and “totalize” ideas of masculinity, reducing it to an artificial and seemingly incontrovertible essentialism.


19 Ibid.
This constructed masculine Subjectivity is undoubtedly confining—the borders that define masculinity in different contexts are narrow, and attempts to stray beyond such borders are always circumspect. However, recognizing the Subject as discursively constructed also provides opportunities for resistance and change. If the Subject is viewed not as essential or given, but rather as culturally inflected and constructed within the symbolic order of discourse, then possibilities for transcending constructions of “normal” masculinity could potentially exist. As Michael Kimmel has stated:

This idea that manhood is socially constructed and historically shifting should not be understood as a loss, as something that is being taken away from men. In fact, it gives us something extraordinarily valuable—agency, the capacity to act. It gives us a sense of historical possibilities to replace the despondent resignation that invariably attends timeless, ahistorical essentialisms.20

Yet how might it be possible to provide the Subject with a sense of agency, without trapping it within the boundaries of an equally confining and essentialist identity?

Although the ontologically lacking Subject is a Subject of discourse, its construction is never finalized, or complete. Even as positioned within the symbolic order, the Subject remains perpetually lacking and “unfinalizable,” even to itself. Infinite meaning, no matter how “accurately” signified, can never be captured within the confines of finite discursive properties. Rather, there exists a perpetual gap, or lack between the signifier and the object that it is intended to signify. As Dylan Evans puts it:

No matter how many signifiers one adds to the signifying chain, the chain is always incomplete; it always lacks the signifier that could complete it. This ‘missing signifier’…is constitutive of the Subject.21

---


21 Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, 96.
The Subject is subverted “not because it is entirely determined by signifiers…but because its determination by signifiers is fundamentally flawed.” Consequently, the Subject remains in a constant state of “becoming,” characterized by a manqué à être, or “want of being,” which can never be fulfilled. The lack between the signifier and signified constitutes an excess of meaning that eludes signification, while simultaneously enabling it to take place. According to Newman, “Subjectivity is constituted by this gap, by this failure of signification.” It represents a realm of “pure potentiality” in which the Subject is not predetermined, but rather bears within it at each moment the potential to be constructed anew.

The omnipresent lack prevents the Subject’s full actualization; yet it also presents a possibility for a “radical outside”—an “excluded interior,” or “nonessential nonplace” for resistance. It creates a space from which oppressive constructions of masculinity can be contested, and from which the construction of new meanings and identities may emerge. As Žižek has explained, the lack represents “a sublime moment,” a moment of emptiness that is filled with possibility; a “truly revolutionary moment” caught in the “infinitesimal lack” between one signifying regime and the next. Exposure of the lack, a rupture in the symbolic order within which the Subject is constituted, not only enables, but in fact demands, the reestablishment of meaning—meaning that can be drawn from

---


23 Ibid. 139.

sentiments of the past, and which can be directed toward the construction of a future Ideal, but which is in no way predetermined or given. As Glyn Daly has argued, “It is because the symbolic, or discursive, order can never fully master its object that we have an essential plurality written into the structure of reality itself.” Bert Olivier echoes this claim: “It is through language that revision and renewal of the subject is possible via different self-descriptions,” in which language “can give rise to new, particularizing variations on a theme of universal import.”

The possibility of resistance and re-construction is based upon the premise that the Subject and discourse sustain one another through a mutually constitutive relationship. The Subject is not constructed unilaterally by discourse, but rather has a hand in producing the discourse in which it is positioned. The Subject desires what is perceived to be lacking, or lost, and as a result of defining this lack, substantive meaning is constructed and reified. Constructions arise through the pursuit of objects that are viewed as capable of restoring the Subject’s original loss—of alleviating its alienation—and of providing a renewed sense of unity and purpose. According to some, this explains why people are willing to risk their lives to save a precious memento, such as a photograph or letter. Such objects, which include, in Žižek’s terms, “sublime objects” such as religion and national identity, provide a sense of unity with something that is perceived to have been lost. They provide meaning, or purpose—a glimpse of a real that can never be fully attained, but which, if attained, would render the Subject complete.

---


The sudden end of the Soviet Union in 1991 revealed the unthinkable: that one of the most powerful regimes in the world, a stable system upon which many citizens had come to rely and with which they had come to identify, was, in fact, unstable and highly contingent. Soviet society was, in the words of Benedict Anderson, an “imagined community” that had been held together by a hegemonic Soviet discourse, anchored largely by the point de capiton “communism.” Consequently, that which was perceived as most lacking during the early 1990s was an Idea of the nation itself. The displacement of Soviet discourse revealed a profound gap, or lack, in the symbolic order within which the masculine Subject had been constituted, demanding fulfillment. The result has been a reconstruction of Russianness based on mythologized memories of the past, and an unceasing tug of war over the gender identities that are both caught up in and charged with embodying these new and uncharted Ideas of Russianness.

**Negotiations of Masculinity and the Russian Idea**

The Russian Idea (Russkaia ideia), as articulated by preeminent Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, corresponds to a character and calling of the Russian people. It comprises “a set of basic values that constitute the self-identity of Russians across social divisions and coalesce into a national project or historical mission.”

---


Idea is a “philosophical conception of the national character” that has at its heart “the notion of the country’s messianic mission, rooted in the vision of Moscow as the Third Rome.”\textsuperscript{30} A bit broader than concepts of nationalism (\textit{natsionalizm}) or patriotism (\textit{patriotizm}), the Russian Idea serves to differentiate Russia from Western culture, politics, and religious traditions. It has influenced politics for centuries, and can be found in writings as prominent as those of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The notion that Russia may be characterized by a unique Idea has also been invoked by heads of state such as Boris Yeltsin, who announced a competition for formulating an “Idea for Russia” (\textit{ideia dlia Russii}) in 1996, as well as Vladimir Putin, who claimed that a Russian Idea would “come about as an organic unification of universal general humanitarian values with the traditional Russian values that have stood the test of time.”\textsuperscript{31} It has been predicated upon the argument that Russia is somehow unique—not Western and distinct from the rest of Eastern Europe. Although characterizations of the Russian Idea have not remained static or unchanged, gender, and in particular masculinity, has always been present as a key constitutive feature.

Setting the stage for the regeneration of Russianness in the contemporary period were the so-called “oligarchs,” or criminally-inclined “businessmen” who emerged on the social and political scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s and embodied everything that Russia had historically not been. As the first chapter will argue, these men, by adopting Western style business practices and taking advantage of an opportune and lawless time, came to be both envied and despised. Their well-fed, pampered, and well-clothed bodies

\textsuperscript{30} Zoe Knox, \textit{Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism} (New York: Routledge, 2005), 138.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid. 139.
literally exuded signs of wealth and abundance, while the rest of the population struggled
to come to terms with a very haphazardly orchestrated and inegalitarian process of
privatization. The oligarchs mapped out a new Idea of Russianness that was characterized
not by a respect for traditional cultural practices and “values that have stood the test of
time,” but rather by an individualistic free-for-all that directly contradicted ideologies of
an empire lost. In the words of Michel Foucault, these spaces that were etched out and
embodied by the oligarchs may be referred to as “heterotopias”—spaces that directly
contradicted both the failed utopia of Soviet life and the promise that democracy and
capitalism once held for post-Soviet Russia. The oligarchs and their criminal antics
inspired for many people a desire of a return to the perceived stability of the past, even if
this stability carried with it the possibility of diminished freedom and increased state
power.

Against the chaos, instability, and criminality of the immediate post-Soviet
period, the Orthodox Church and the state under Putin have contributed uniquely to both
a post-Soviet national Idea and to ongoing negotiations over masculine Subjectivity.
Through their return to “traditional” ideas and practices, these heterogeneous, yet
oftentimes interrelated actors have served to anchor otherwise “floating signifiers” into a
newly constructed web of significance. Within each discourse, the relationship between
the masculine Subject and Russian identity are articulated in slightly different ways: the
discourse of the church predicates the salvation of the soul (both individual and national)
on the adoption of ‘traditional’ practices that pertain largely to the family and matters of
sexuality; and the state, by discursively connecting the individual male body with the
body politic, constructs (and in turn reinforces) a gendered conceptualization of
citizenship based on centralized political policies and the resurrection of historical symbolism. Together, these two actors have appealed to many people for their ability to not only regenerate a sense of stability and permanence in the post-Soviet period, but also to restore a prideful sense of Russianness to an otherwise lacking populace. Yet as will be discussed in chapters two and three, the constructions of Russianness that have emerged within state and church discourse have been consequential not only in terms of their centralizing and authoritarian tendencies, but also for the very specific constitutive Subject positions that they mandate.

Hearkening back to both Imperial and Soviet times, Vladimir Putin, first as president, then prime minister, and now as president again, has become an almost tsar-like figure in contemporary Russia. The president has attributed Russia’s post-Soviet ills to a lack of patriarchic authority, and, combined with rhetoric of democracy and progress, has based his constructions of an Ideal future upon a return to mythologized ideas and practices of the past. In the name of reconstructing a modern Idea of Russia, he has centralized the economy, established control over media enterprises, and revived prominent national symbols such as the double-headed eagle of the tsar and the national anthem of the Soviet Union. While pronouncing the end of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy in Russian history, the president has, similar to his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, described Russia as a nation built upon principles of Orthodoxy, and has advocated a return of Orthodox traditions and practices to Russian society. He has invited heads of the church to official state functions, effectively blurring any boundary between church and state, and has leant careful political support to the inclusion of Orthodox education in school curricula. These developments are highlighted in the second chapter,
entitled: Vladimir Putin and the Body Politic: The Coalescence of Corporeality and Temporality in Putin’s Russia, points to the development of a mutually constitutive relationship between the construction of the masculine body and the body politic—where men are once again being touted as both exemplars and builders of a future Russia characterized by strength, power and prestige.

The church has reemerged in the contemporary period as a significant point de capiton of the Russian national Idea—and consequently has served to stipulate “normal” or “natural” gender identities in very particular ways. Discourse of the church has defined Russia’s lack in terms of “Godlessness,” sin, and an overall lack of “spiritual-morality,” attributing the disintegration of society to a disregard for traditional family practices and a “darkened state of the human heart.”32 According to many church writings, the only way of ensuring the future survival of the nation-state itself, as well as the spiritual salvation of Russian citizens, is through a reinstatement of Orthodox teachings and practices—teachings and practices upon which, the church claims, Russia was founded with the adoption of Byzantine Christianity in 988. As apparent in the church’s 2004 Basis of the Social Concept, most teachings and practices are centered upon issues of morality and proper conduct of Russian citizens—particularly with regard to the roles of men and women and their places within both the family and the larger “family” of society more broadly. As Archpriest Krechetov Valerian has put it, “God created Adam first, then Eve, so that a hierarchy must exist; the head of the family is the father, then comes

the mother. In much church discourse, immorality in the family and the improper upbringing of children are named responsible for the decline of both individuals and society. Without a return to traditional teachings and practices, future salvation remains elusive. Interestingly, one of the venues into which the church has recently made its foray has been the Russian Armed Forces, where it has had a particularly prominent role in the “spiritual-moral” education of men and young boys. Such initiatives of the church have received broad political support from the state, and have been well received by a populace in search of an “authentic” Russian identity and the return of a normal way of life.

As powerful and monolithic as centripetalizing discourses such as these have become in recent years, their hegemony has not been left unchallenged. Although oppositional voices exist within each discourse, such sentiments are oftentimes muted in a society plagued by increasingly rigid standards of media control. The more effective locus of resistance, where alternative conceptualizations of the nation and gender identities can be constructed with relative, albeit cautious autonomy, is within the discourse of popular culture, particularly film. Cultural products have, for centuries, provided a position from which hegemonic constructions may be contested, or alternative viewpoints asserted, and a space forged for new alternatives to emerge. With the relaxing of censorship in the 1980s and 1990s there emerged an array of popular culture productions—predominantly in the forms of detective fiction, mysteries, and provocative “postmodern” works by the likes of authors such as Victor Pelevin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Venedict Erofeev—which, in the post-Soviet period, have served to oppose

33 Ekaterina Vasil’evna Shchegoleva, Brak I Sem’ia (Moscow: Olma Media Group, 2003), 109.
hegemonic constructions of the church, state, and nationalist youth organizations. Art depicting the desecration of national and religious symbols or sexual “immorality” has been severely chastised by the church and banned by the state, as has the production of certain films, pornographic or otherwise. Consequently, such works have also provided much fodder for these discourses’ nationalist initiatives. Nevertheless, by mocking both the chaos of the post-Soviet period and the hegemonic constructions that followed, productions of popular culture have become powerful instruments in providing a space in which alternative conceptualizations of both the national Idea and masculine Subject may emerge.

The fourth chapter, consequently, addresses this ability to mock both the past and present, and to forge new possibilities for both masculine Subjectivity and Russianness through performativity in late and post-Soviet film. This chapter addresses the ways in which post-Soviet filmmakers, now unimpeded by censorship or strict provisions of the state, have sought to push back against the establishment—not necessarily by creating something new, but by mocking, trivializing, and recontextualizing symbols and practices of the past. They have capitalized upon a “play” of signification, re-exposing the lack by which the Subject is constituted, thereby revealing the constructed nature of hegemonic articulations of both Subjectivity and the nation, and making a space for alternative possibilities to emerge.

**Literature Review**

This dissertation is interdisciplinary in nature, traversing areas of inquiry as diverse as gender studies, cultural criticism, nationality studies, and Russian culture,
history, and politics. Drawing primarily from ideas of discourse theory and psycholinguistics, an effort is made to provide a new way of looking at a combination of topics and issues that have each been addressed individually to some extent, but which have not yet been brought into a single, coherent project. The post-Soviet period has witnessed an onslaught of research on Russian national identity as related to politics, the economy, and ethnicity. Scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Richard Sakwa, Ronald Grigor Suny, Vera Tolz, and Serguei Oushakine have written on the complexities of the post-Soviet context, reflecting on the difficulty of constructing a new national identity amid turbulent times.\(^{34}\) Few such projects, however, sketch out the contours of this identity in explicitly gendered terms, or show the gendered nature of the historical symbols that go into constructions of the new Russia. Russian culture and history scholars such as Helena Goscilo (and particularly her edited book with Andrea Lanoux, *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture* ) is a notable exception, as is Sarah Ashwin’s *Gender, State, and Society in Contemporary Russia* and Rebecca Kay’s *Gender, Equality, and Difference During and After State Socialism*.\(^ {35}\)

These scholars each bridge cultural and political divides in their analysis of

---


representations of gender in Russian culture and in their tracings of gendered experiences in the late and post-Soviet context.

The bulk of the work that has been done on gender in Russia focuses on issues faced by women, looking in particular at women’s economic, political, and legal rights after communism. With regard to masculinity in Russia specifically, Rebecca Kay’s *Men in Contemporary Russia* addresses many of the empirical changes that were experienced by men upon the Soviet Union’s dissolution and explores some of the difficulties of coming to terms with the post-Soviet environment. Elena Meshcherkina has also written about the perils of men in the contemporary context, as demonstrated by her chapter in Ashwin’s book, entitled: “New Russian Men: Masculinity Regained?” Other studies that address issues of masculinity oftentimes assume a queer approach, such as exemplified by Brian Baer’s *Other Russias*, as well as Dan Healy’s work on gay masculinity in the Soviet period and pornography in post-Soviet Russia. Kevin Moss, Laurie Essig, and Luc Beaudoin have also contributed to this rich literature on queer studies in Russia, from perspectives that are oftentimes at once critical and political, drawing from a wealth of cultural media.


It is common for research on gender in Russia to evaluate one particular aspect of culture or society, such as a specific genre of literature or film. Such scholars oftentimes employ the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault in their work, as is the case of Yana Hashamova, whose major book, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imaginations of the West in Post-Soviet Film* draws from Freud and Lacan to explicate Russia’s post-Soviet view of the West—and itself—through film.³⁸ Birgit Beumers has also made a significant name for herself as a preeminent scholar of post-Soviet film studies, taking a largely historical approach to her 1999 book *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*.³⁹ And although his work focuses on Hollywood film, Martin Flanagan makes use of Bakhtin’s ideas on the novel in his interpretations of contemporary cinema.⁴⁰ With regard to literature specifically, Mark Lipovetsky, Mikhail Epstein, and Alexander Genis have written on postmodernism and its relationship to Russian culture, most notably through their works: *Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature*, and *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*.⁴¹ Finally, the work of cultural critics such as Eliot Borenstein has


addressed cultural productions in a contemporary context through work such as *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Culture*.\(^{42}\)

It is somewhat curious that the scholarship that has been done on Russia’s “oligarchs,” all of whom are men, has not taken a gendered approach to explaining either the behavior of these men or their impact on Russian society, politics, and identity. As discussed in the following chapter, work such as David Hoffman’s *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* and Paul Klebnikov’s *Godfather of the Kremlin: The Decline of Russia in the Age of Gangster Capitalism*\(^{43}\) are thorough, albeit fairly sensationalized accounts of the Oligarchs’ scandals, as told from economic and political perspectives. They seldom address these antics as they relate to Ideas of Russianness or masculinity. Similarly, much of the work that has been done on the Orthodox Church—one of Russia’s oldest and most prominent institutions, tends to be approached from a historical perspective, rather than postulating what the church’s return to contemporary society might mean for the future of Russia and the men and women whose lives are shaped by its teachings and practices. John Garrard and Carol Garrard’s *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent* provides such a historical account of Orthodoxy across the centuries, which is particularly insightful with regard to the church’s historical

---


relationship with the Russian military. Zoe Knox provides a comprehensive overview of the church as a key element of the Russian Idea as expressed by Berdyaev in her book *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*. But unfortunately, neither of these prominent works dedicates a significant amount of time to matters of gender and the family.

This dissertation provides a fairly expansive glimpse of post-Soviet Russia’s process of self-identification and construction of gender identities, while simultaneously providing a more detailed analysis of four prominent aspects of contemporary Russian society. This analysis is neither all-inclusive nor exhaustive, but it does fill many of the gaps that have been left by scholarship that has been conducted on similar topics. In general, this work is intended to provide both a fairly broad picture of gender and the nation in post-Soviet Russia, while also investigating, through a unique discursive approach, some rather specific issues in ways that have not been addressed previously. Each chapter is intended to stand alone, but should also weave together into a comprehensive narrative on the ways in which the masculine Subject has been constructed, contested, and lived in the context of post-Soviet Russia’s national Idea.

---


45 Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism*. 
CHAPTER ONE
MASCULINITY AS HETEROTOPIA—OLIGARCHS AND THE REMAPPING OF THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

In the capitalist world, you cannot be free without money, so people choose money in order to become free, or so they believe. While they’re chasing this money, of course, they lose part of their freedom. It’s a complicated never-ending story, but this is it.\(^{46}\) – Tatiana Tolstaya, 2007

The downfall of the Soviet regime altered the Russian landscape in ways that had not been seen since the overthrow of the tsar at the hands of the Bolsheviks: borders were redrawn as Soviet satellite states declared their independence; industries, businesses, and property that had been managed predominantly by the state were thrust haphazardly into private hands; and an influx of Western goods and practices undermined ideas of individual and collective identity that had persevered, although not uncontested, for more than seventy years. In the face of this tumultuous change, the ideologies and practices that had long shaped citizens’ lives were turned upside down, leading to fundamental questions about what kind of Idea would come to characterize the inceptive Russian nation-state and what place men and women would have in this new and uncharted context. During much of the Soviet period, the strength of the empire was synonymous with masculine prowess—a construction in which men were to be both architects and embodiments of a future communist utopia. Positioned within a symbolic order in which

the private was subsumed by the public, and where individualistic pursuits were trumped by the development of a common good, masculine Subjectivity was defined not in terms of individual achievement, but rather on the basis of a man’s contribution to the collective—to the development of a classless society in which citizens would provide for the common endeavor according to their ability and receive the fruit of this effort according to their needs. As stipulated by the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, only when liberated from the shackles of capitalist labor could one truly be free.

Although the paradise on earth once promised by Soviet communism was eventually revealed to be little more than a romantic revolutionary chimera, Soviet life had afforded citizens a unique sense of stability, identity, and freedom through collectivity. Despite the censorship, travel restrictions, and overall lack of civil society that characterized the lived reality of most, citizens were unencumbered from the necessity of procuring fundamental provisions such as housing, health care, education, and employment. And due to a history that in many ways can be characterized by the ability to overcome difficulty and persevere through adverse times, there existed tremendous pride in the Soviet Union’s many accomplishments. Within this context, men and women found their places—places that provided them with a stable and meaningful purpose in the construction of a radiant future. Although women were officially regarded as equal contributors to the communist project, it was the “New Soviet Man” who was held up as a national Ideal to be emulated and praised—represented by the powerful leaders, soldiers, and laborers who were charged with protecting the Motherland, defending the Fatherland, and literally embodying the courage and fortitude of the empire. With the downfall of the Soviet Union came the displacement of the monolithic
discourse in which masculinity and femininity had been defined, revealing an omnipresent lack that was both liberating and constraining—one in which people suddenly found themselves uninhibited by the oftentimes draconian mandates of Soviet life and free to craft a future of their choosing, but where this newfound freedom would paradoxically impose its own debilitating limitations.

Freedom in the new Russia was not immediately realized as a positive development. Rather, the dissolution of structure and oversight that the Soviet Union had provided enabled a veritable free for all, where crime, corruption, and extreme economic inequality came to characterize life in the post-Soviet context. Some of the most prominent cartographers of this post-Soviet space were the New Russians, or so-called “oligarchs”—a powerful group of businessmen who, through their criminal antics and the immense fortunes that they amassed, would come to remap the contours of both Russian identity and masculine Subjectivity. In some respects, Russia’s oligarchs could be said to typify the newly liberated Russian man, as their virtually unimpeded pursuit of wealth and power during the late 1980s and 1990s imposed upon them few limitations: enormous homes, private jets, and beautiful women were theirs for the taking, as they navigated the post-Soviet terrain effortlessly, “cavorting with thugs, prostitutes, easing their way with plenty of cash.”

Through crafty political maneuvering and by gaining control of Russia’s most lucrative oil, media, and automobile industries, oligarchs came to fruition as a type of New Russian who capitalized on the unbridled lawlessness of the


48 The term “New Russian” refers to the approximately 3 percent of the Russian population that amassed tremendous wealth in early post-Soviet Russia. Oligarchs, who
defunct Soviet empire in pursuit of their own self-seeking objectives. A host of books, most of which are highly sensationalized, details the oligarchs’ exploits: *Godfather of the Kremlin; Sale of the Century*—Russia’s wild ride from communism to capitalism; and *Casino Moscow*—A tale of greed and adventure on capitalism’s wildest frontier are examples of the fascination that has developed with regard to Russia’s richest men.

Among the glitterati, *anekdoty* proliferate, inquiring in dry Russian humor about why an oligarch would purchase a yacht for 30 million dollars when he could have been even more frivolous and purchased the same yacht for 50 million. As Mark Lipovetsky wrote in 2003, oligarchs have become almost mythological entities: those “beings possessing a *sui generis* code of behavior incompatible with mortals.”

This mythologized portrayal of the oligarchs, in which they “were viewed as standing financially above—yet in other aspects dramatically below—the norms of mundane reality,” arose largely from business tactics that were lauded as innovative and clever on one hand, but scorned as illegal and fundamentally unethical, on the other.

Oligarchs exploited political connections and economic resources to which most citizens had no access, channeling these resources not toward the good of the inceptive nation-state, but rather toward the expansion of their own financial holdings. Money laundering, embezzlement, pyramid schemes, and contract killings became the order of the day, as these men paid off prominent officials to gain control over the political and economic

---


*50* Ibid. 55.
institutions that should have been regulating their practices. As a result of the overall lawlessness of the time, the illegality of oligarchs’ activities went largely unquestioned in the early post-Soviet period; it was difficult to deem such behavior illegal when Russia’s legal system was in shambles and was, in many ways, operated by the same men who now stand accused of violating its boundaries. As David Hoffman reminds us, “Russian capitalism was born into an airless space, a vacuum without effective laws and a state so badly weakened it could not enforce laws that were on the books.” Russia’s lacking rule of law provided a sort of free-for-all for those who were there to take advantage of an opportune time. Oligarchs exploited the weakness of the state, making a fortune off of the legacy of the Soviet system, while ironically using their Soviet ties to advance their own interests.

In sensationalized accounts, Russia’s oligarchs have been referred to as “leaders of the new Russia, architects and apostles of a new order.” In the process of building their empires, the oligarchs engaged in a reconfiguration of the post-Soviet space, crafting a new symbolic order and positioning themselves to become the de facto rulers of Russia. As these ultra-wealthy men took control of the extraction of natural resources, erected new buildings across the Moscow skyline, and introduced Russia to certain goods and opportunities that were out of reach during Soviet times, the topography of Russia was literally remapped. In more ideational terms, oligarchs’ activities redefined Russia’s symbolic space as a land of capitalist potential, in which men’s success became measured not in terms of their service to the state, but rather in accordance with their political

---


52 Ibid. 3.
power and the width of their pocketbooks. Even a new language emerged—one that included Western terms such as “biznes,” (and correspondingly, biznesmen and the less common feminine variant biznesmenka), “marketing,” and “distrib’iutor,” while antiquated Soviet terms such as tovarishch (comrade) were relegated to the pages of Pravda. For some people, the oligarchs’ “business” endeavors demonstrated the possibilities that existed for Russia to redefine itself after years of Soviet stagnation, and for individuals to pursue personal freedoms that had long been prohibited by the state. Cheered on by commentators in the West, the oligarchs embodied the newly liberated Russia, serving as living representations of capitalist opportunity. Western corporations began to see in Russia not a Cold War adversary, but rather a lucrative business partner—a land with vast, untapped resources that were managed by a cadre of young and enterprising entrepreneurs.

However, not everyone has shared this reading of the oligarchs’ text. As the post-Soviet period unfolded and the wealth disparities between these New Russians and the rest of the population became increasingly pronounced, the men who had made their fortunes during an opportune and lawless time came to be viewed by many Russians as enemies of the people—as merciless kleptocrats who were raping the Motherland for their personal gain. While the majority of the population struggled to get by in their tiny apartments, standing in long lines to secure whatever meager provisions they could afford, the bodies of the oligarchs were pampered and well fed, enjoying long holidays on glamorous, private yachts and at vacation resorts abroad. Largely as a consequence of the oligarchs’ endeavors, Russians’ first taste of capitalism and democracy was decidedly unpalatable: The oligarchs ushered in a cult of Western-inspired consumerism in which
material possessions were valorized over culture and tradition, and where the free market came to be viewed as synonymous with crime and corruption, rather than the freedom and individual potential that some Western advocates had so heavily promoted. As Stephen Fortescue has argued, “perceptions of morality, equality and social justice are too important to the legitimacy of any politico-economic system, much less one in as difficult and delicate a transition process as Russia.”

With politicians at their beck and call, the oligarchs and their lawless escapades deprived the state of much needed legitimacy, leading to vast public distrust and severely hampering Russia’s already fledgling reform efforts.

Public opinion polls that were conducted by the Levada Center beginning in the early 1990s unsurprisingly reveal low public confidence in then-president Boris Yeltsin and his entourage. The leader’s disapproval rating hovered around 90 percent for much of his tenure in office, peaking at 93 percent upon the devaluation of the ruble in October 1998. Many Russians expressed regret over the dissolution of the Soviet Union, siting economic and political instability as primary concerns. When asked in 2003 what they felt had been the biggest impediments to Russia’s economic growth, “the laziness of bureaucrats” and “the ‘oligarchs’ and their lack of interest in the economic revival of the country” took top honors. But it was not only economic inequality and political corruption that stirred public outrage: In the minds of many citizens, the oligarchs represented the antithesis of Russianness. They came to be viewed as culturally ignorant.

---


and uncouth opportunists who were selling out the heart of Russia in pursuit of selfish, individualistic endeavors. The days in which stadiums had been packed to the brim for poetry readings by the likes of Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Bella Akhmadulina were over—traded in for counterfeit Levi jeans and pirated Western movies. Consequently, while re-mapping the Fatherland to accommodate their financial and political ambitions, the oligarchs and their shady business practices simultaneously mapped out a different type of space—a symbolic and discursive space that made painfully evident everything that Russia was not, and which played a significant role in generating desires for the construction of a new Russian Idea that was characterized not by chaos and unpredictability, but rather by stability and a return to the cultural practices that had once made Russia great.

**Heterotopic Masculinities in the New Russia**

In the words of Michel Foucault, the spaces that were mapped out by the oligarchs’ economic and political exploits could be thought of as “heterotopias”—spaces that undermined any semblance of existing order and ran in direct contradiction to the failed utopia of Soviet life, while simultaneously evoking a collective yearning for the stability, security, and national pride that Russia lacked. The oligarchs’ pursuit of personal objectives at the expense of the common good, their manipulation of natural and financial resources, and their re-ordering of the political system as a highly competitive and hierarchical environment directly opposed the collective and centripetalizing processes of the tightly regulated Soviet state. At the same time, their actions brought into clear view the pervasive lack of identity and optimism that characterized life in the post-
Soviet context—the lack of a future utopia, or “placeless place” that was in many ways desired, but which remained markedly out of reach. Whereas utopias represent “unreal” spaces that “have a general relation of direct or inverse analogy with the real space of society,” heterotopias “constitute a sort of counter-arrangement” of this unrealized and inaccessible Ideal. Through actions that ranged from Boris Berezovsky’s manipulation of the political apparatus to Roman Abramovich’s literal re-mapping of the Russian frontier, the oligarchs’ practices comprised a constellation of heterotopic spaces that generated desires among the Russian populous to revive historical memories and practices that were said to be at the heart of Russian identity, but which had been eclipsed by the influx of Western ideas and a rather involuntary break from the past.

As Russel West-Pavlov explains, space “is not a pre-existing receptacle for human action, but is created by that action; space, in turn, exerts its own variety of agency, modeling the human actors who have configured it.” Conceived in physical, symbolic, and discursive terms, the heterotopic spaces that were shaped by the oligarchs’ practices mutually constituted particular manifestations of masculine Subjectivity that came to be at once envied and despised—masculinities that were themselves heterotopic, signifying clearly the problems and non-Russian characteristics of the post-Soviet period.

Embodying the uncultured lawlessness of capitalist “freedom” in the new Russia, these


58 Russel West-Pavlov, Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 19.
Subjectivities painfully undermined the relatively stable conceptions of both masculinity and nation that had characterized a powerful empire lost. They represented a new economy of sexual exchange in which wealth and individual success became defining features of masculine prowess, and where men who lacked the ability to pursue such objectives were regarded as lazy alcoholics who were forced to depend on their more resilient wives and girlfriends for support. Ironically, notwithstanding their overt, “hyper-masculine” personae, the oligarchs, with their Western leanings and their penchant for criminal activity, simultaneously catalyzed the already escalating disdain of male homosexuality in the post-Soviet context, which has oftentimes been viewed as a non-Russian phenomenon—as something that has been brought to Russia from the West, and which previously predominated mainly among criminals in the Gulag. By pointing to everything that an “authentic” Russia is not, Oligarchs’ activities have mapped out not only what it means to be Russian in the post-Soviet context, but also what it meant to be a “normal” Russian man.

As explained in the introductory chapter, the masculine Subject is a Subject of discourse—it is neither predetermined nor essential, but rather emerges out of an omnipresent lack and is shaped by the context in which it is positioned, while simultaneously giving shape to that context. In certain respects, the heterotopias that the oligarchs’ practices engendered provided this lack with substance: they came to constitute an environment in which political cronyism prevailed, where credentials could be bought and sold, and where Russian tradition and culture were shoved to the wayside in favor of über-sexualized consumerist pursuits. As women became hyper-feminized,

---

59 Beaudoin, The (Homo)Sexualization of Russian Masculinity.
influenced by the availability of Western fashion and embracing an overt sexuality that had hitherto been prohibited, the success of men, rather than being defined in terms of their contributions to the state, came to be understood hierarchically—in competition with one another and on the basis of personal wealth and status. The chaotic post-Soviet space that was fomented in large part by the oligarchs’ activities not only generated logistical impediments to navigating everyday life—it also undermined both individual and collective identities that had been given the illusion of stability and permanence, and generated desires for the re-construction of an Idea that was uniquely Russian and for a space in which men and women could once again find their places. As Ruth Levitas points out:

The sense of ‘something’s missing’ can be read in every trace of how it might be otherwise, how the ever-present sense of lack might be assuaged. From this a much wider view of utopia emerges, in which it becomes not a blueprint or prescription, but the expression of desire for a better way of living.60

Despite the diversity of the oligarchs’ endeavors, their practices ran against traditional understandings of Russianness in almost every respect, each contributing to a narrative in which this “trace of how it might be otherwise” could be read clearly.

It was against this backdrop of discontent that the semi-authoritarian, centralizing policies of Vladimir Putin and the conservative, moralizing principles of the Russian Orthodox Church gained notoriety in Russian society and discourse.

In 2000, the chaos, pauperization and fatigue of ordinary Russians made them eager to trade what liberties they had in the democratic Russia for Putin’s ‘diktatura zakona’ (dictatorship of the law).\textsuperscript{61}

And indeed, Alec Rasizade’s assertion is supported by public opinion polls: in 1990, 62 percent of respondents agreed that “most [people] cannot live without the tutelage of the state.” By 2011, this number had grown to a whopping 79 percent.\textsuperscript{62} In 1994, 54 percent of respondents suggested that “order in the state” is more important than respect for human rights, which received only 25 percent of the vote. Although the percentage of respondents who advocate human rights had increased by 2011, 53 percent of those surveyed continued to prioritize state order. In 2011, only 55 percent of respondents agreed that “Russia needs a democracy,” and only 23 percent felt that Russia needs a democracy “such as those in developed countries of Europe and America.”\textsuperscript{63} Putin came to power in December 1999 promising to eliminate oligarchs as a class, while clamping down on the crime, corruption, and the shadow economy that had come to constitute a way of life over the past decade. In his much-touted “Millennium” speech, he lamented both the failures of the Soviet state and the abysmal conditions of post-Soviet Russia, declaring that “Russians want stability, confidence in the future and the ability to plan ahead for themselves and their children, not just for a month but for years and even


\textsuperscript{62} See www.levada.ru/press/2011081003.html

\textsuperscript{63} See http://www.levada.ru/press/2011081003.html
And as a result of the marked improvements that took place during his incumbency, he quickly became a new “father of the people,” positioning himself at the crux of tradition and modernity, and symbolizing, through his strong-handed governance and machismo persona, what the Ideal man in contemporary Russia should be.

Justifying its actions as demanded by the chaos and “immorality” of the post-Soviet period, the Orthodox Church has also gained significant traction, playing an important role in the reconstruction of an authentic Russian Idea and “normal,” or “natural,” conceptions of masculine Subjectivity. During a 2008 interview with Spiegel, Patriarch Kirill was asked about the church’s stance on the supposedly interrelated issues of crime, fraud, murder, and homosexuality, all of which, over the course of the interview, became tied in with the rise of the oligarchs and capitalism in the new Russia. “Crime and corruption were rampant after the collapse of the Soviet Union,” the interviewer commented. “Murder, robbery and fraud became mass phenomena. Wasn’t this a defeat for the church?” Kirill responded by pointing to the moral relativity that “foreign influence” and consumerism introduced to the presumably otherwise uncontaminated nation-state: “Reviving morality is a long process,” the patriarch maintained.

Our economy was in ruins, foreign influence was growing and so was the consumption mentality, the focus on performance, all of these postmodern ideas which treat everything as relative and no longer require us to distinguish between truth and lies.⁶⁵

---


Later in the interview, Kirill applied the same logic to the increased visibility of homosexuality in Moscow, referring again to moral relativism of the West: “What troubles you, for example, about homosexuals marching through the streets of Moscow in a parade, just as they do in Berlin or Amsterdam?” The interviewer asked. “It distorts the boundary between good and evil, between sin and sanctity,” said Kirill. “We aren’t talking about just any decision. We are talking about morals. They want us to believe that morality is relative. But that’s completely untrue.”

Over the course of this discussion, and with regard to constructions of Russianness and masculinity more broadly, the influx of Western ideas embodied by oligarchs—most of whom are Jewish—played a central role. Although the patriarch has been careful to not criticize the wealth of the oligarchs too harshly, he has simultaneously made clear the church’s disapproval of their lack of charity and overall neglect of the country. When former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov criticized Roman Abramovich for his purchase of the Chelsea Football Club as “not the kind of good deed that is essential for our spiritual atmosphere,” Patriarch Kirill agreed that the outburst was “very correct and necessary.” “The names of people with colossal fortunes were mentioned today…but I do not know whether they feed ten people each day,” the patriarch added. Luzhkov, who is sometimes regarded as one of Russia’s “original” oligarchs, has fared better with the church than many others. By adamantly condemning homosexuality as “satanic” and

---

66 Ibid.

repeatedly ensuring that gay pride parades that were scheduled to take place during his
tenure in office were either prohibited altogether or were met with a harsh police
response, the former Moscow mayor has positioned himself as a “normal” Russian man,
seeking to counter the Western influence that has pervaded the city and return Russia to
its traditional roots. Luzhkov has also endeavored to reconfigure the post-Soviet space in
Orthodox terms, overseeing the reconstruction of the famed Cathedral of Christ our
Savior, which had been destroyed by Stalin, as an exact replica of the original. As
Hoffman describes the new church, “the structure itself was an imposing castle by the
Moscow River, with a fairy-tale look that shimmered from a distance.”\textsuperscript{68} As mayor of
Moscow, Luzhkov enjoyed considerable popularity before being ousted by Dmitrii
Medvedev in September 2010.

The power that Putin and the church have amassed as a consequence of their
perceived abilities to establish strength, stability, and national identity in the ailing
nation-state—to provide hope for a more prosperous future in which the heterotopic
spaces etched out by the oligarchs would be left in the past—has brought about new Ideas
of both Russianness and masculine Subjectivity. Indicative of this process is the
perpetual mapping and re-negotiation of the oligarchs’ places in Russian society: the
literal and discursive spaces that the oligarchs carve out for themselves and the reactions,
both politically and in the private ream, to those spaces. The oligarchs who have erected
at least a façade of charity toward Russia and who have in some small measure
acquiesced to Putin’s political proclivities have enjoyed exceptional comfort within
Russia’s borders; conversely, the men who are perceived to have become rich at the

expense of the nation, or who have challenged Putin’s stabilizing political authority, have literally been either expelled from the Russian landscape or relegated to its most remote and inhospitable corners. The process of unraveling this mapping of the Fatherland requires us, as West Pavlov has remarked, to

\[\text{[I]ay bare the conditions of possibility which allow meaning to be generated—and upon which truth is then delineated, not as something essential, intrinsic, or eternal, but as the contingent product of a process of production.}^{69}\]

The remainder of this chapter provides examples of the ways in which three of Russia’s most prominent oligarchs—Roman Abramovich, Boris Berezovsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky—have contributed to the construction of an ever-changing cartography of the post-Soviet space and considers the implications of this narrative for understandings of both Russianness and Subjective masculinities in contemporary Russia.

**Oligarchs and the Remapping of the Fatherland**

Among the many significant players who emerged on the scene during the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, Abramovich, Berezovsky, and Khodorkovsky exemplify the diversity of heterotopic spaces that the oligarchs’ activities have collectively comprised.\(^{70}\) Educated at prominent Soviet institutions and with Western mentors such as Rupert Murdoch and Geoffrey Sachs at their service, these powerful men quickly acquired the keys to capitalist ingenuity in the soon-to-be post-Soviet

---

\(^{69}\) West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze*, 22-23.

\(^{70}\) David Hoffman’s comprehensive work on the oligarchs lists the six “original” oligarchs as including: Boris Berezovsky; Antoly Chubais; Vladimir Guzinsky; Mikhail Khodorkovsky; Alexander Smolensky; and Yuri Luzhkov. (Luzhkov, however, is infrequently treated as an oligarch in other writings on the subject.)
environment. Berezovsky (Abramovich’s mentor) is perhaps the most controversial and glamorized of the oligarchs, having made his fortune by dealing in shady car manufacturing schemes and media enterprises before fleeing to London in 2000 amid charges of illegal business activities. Berezovsky has since become a fierce critic of Vladimir Putin, asserting that the leader is returning Russia to a totalitarian state and calling for his resignation. Abramovich has literally traversed the Russian map—holding stakes in some of Russia’s most prominent oil, aluminum, and airline industries, in addition to engaging in curious political activities in the Far East—and is the only one out of the three oligarchs herein discussed who, due to his close ties with the Kremlin and his girlfriend’s support of the arts, continues to thrive in contemporary Russia. And although Khodorkovsky’s fate has not been sealed definitively, the repeated denial by Russian courts to release him from the Siberian prisons where he has been held since challenging Putin’s authority in 2003 generate little optimism about his future and reaffirm the strong grip that Putin maintains over political, economic, and social affairs. After his oil company Yukos was carved up and appropriated by the state, Khodorkovsky, who was once Russia’s wealthiest man and an ardent proponent of capitalism and democracy, has been made into a living example of boundaries in Russia that are not to be transgressed.

Together, the activities of these three men paint an interesting portrait of the ways in which oligarchs’ activities, sometimes brutally corrupt and at other times modestly charitable, have both shaped and served as barometers for public and political perceptions of what constitutes Ideal Russianness and Russian masculinity in the contemporary period. In the discussion that follows, diverse biographical snapshots of each man under consideration are presented as constitutive of a particular narrative of Russianness, each
contributing to the larger symbolic order in which the parameters of masculinity are perpetually negotiated and rewritten. These accounts are neither all-inclusive nor exhaustive; rather, they are intended to serve as examples of the differing types of activities in which oligarchs have engaged and to demonstrate the ways in which those activities have contributed to a mapping of the post-Soviet space that differed dramatically from those of the past, and which in many ways have catalyzed desires for the establishment of a centralized and authoritative voice in the contemporary period. Chapters two and three provide analyses of the ways in which Ideas of Russianness and masculine Subjectivity have developed within discourses of the state under Putin and the Orthodox Church. This chapter is in large part intended to complement those analyses by exemplifying the role that oligarchs played in catalyzing the emergence of a more heavy-handed, distinctively Russian type of freedom over that offered by Western-style capitalism and democracy. As with any discursive “text,” the reception of the text is as important as its production. As such, attention will also be paid to the ways in which oligarchs’ activities and their implications for Russia have been received and interpreted, mainly through literature, film, and critical news reports.

**Democracy and Freedom as Mapped Out by Boris Berezovsky**

Boasting that he and six other men controlled over 50 percent of Russia’s gross domestic product, Boris Berezovsky coined the term “oligarch” and reconfigured the post-Soviet space in ways that in many respects made possible the ascendance of Putin, the church, and popular desires for stability and a normal Idea of Russianness.\(^{71}\) Formerly

one of the richest and most powerful men in Russia, the young and ambitious Berezovsky embodied capitalist and consumerist freedom—becoming an almost God-like figure whose practices comprised heterotopic spaces that would lead to his ultimate exodus from Russia. The oligarch’s virtual ownership of Russia’s most prominent automobile, media, and airline industries were the keys to his success, while simultaneously setting a corrupt standard for carrying out business in the new Russia. His role in the extraction and distribution of natural resources (oil and aluminum) represented an unabashed reconfiguration of the land itself for financial gain, while sending enormous amounts of capital abroad rather than reinvesting it in his home country. And his political maneuvering, in which Berezovsky is credited with almost singlehandedly catapulting Boris Yeltsin into his second term as president of Russia, in many ways laid the foundation for Russia’s future political trajectory. Ironically, had Berezovsky not ensured Yeltsin’s reelection, Yeltsin would not have named Putin as president, and Berezovsky might not be in exile today. In many respects, the oligarch’s pursuit of unlimited individual freedom led to his own demise—to constructions of a future, unrealized utopia in which there would be no room for him and his shady business practices.

The son of a Jewish construction engineer and a pediatric nurse, Berezovsky, who was born in Moscow in 1946, attended a forestry institute before arriving at the Institute of Control Sciences as a researcher in 1969. Known for having an exceptionally analytical mind and steadfast energy and willpower, he quickly proved himself as a scientist and mathematician, eventually heading his own laboratory that was dedicated to use of applied mathematics to study decision-making processes. Throughout the ascendance of his lucrative career, the aspiring oligarch achieved nearly every degree and
award that the Soviet Union conferred, including the Lenin Komsomol Award, the State Award, and the Lenin Award. Although the process of earning a doctorate degree during the Soviet period was oftentimes more political than academic, Berezovsky navigated the terrain fastidiously, eventually acquiring the coveted title of PhD, as well. Yet perhaps more important than Berezovsky’s scientific and academic aptitude (it has been written that by his own admission, he wasn’t a brilliant scientist) was his ability to network—to forge connections by giving speeches and organizing seminars both domestically and abroad, and to work his way into corporate and political circles that would eventually afford him tremendous opportunity.

As the Economist reported in March 2000, “Mr. Berezovsky embodies the distinctive characteristic of the ruling elite in post-Soviet Russia: cynical ruthlessness. By his own account, two guiding principles for dealings with other people are that ‘everyone can be bought, and everyone has a price’.” These “guiding principles,” which soon became standard practice in the business world, would detrimentally taint perceptions of capitalism, democracy, and masculinity in Russia for years to come.

Some of Berezovsky’s most scandalous business practices revolved around his dealings in the automobile industry. He began by selling computer software, mainly to


Soviet committees who were persuaded to buy his programs. One of the companies for which he would come to provide software support was Avtovaz, The Soviet Union’s largest car manufacturer. Then in the Volga River town of Togliatti in 1988, Berezovsky founded the car dealership Logovaz, which would eventually come to account for 10 percent of Avtovaz’s Russian sales (approximately 45,000 cars annually). Yet these sales transpired within a space of criminality and corruption. According to Forbes, Avtovaz sold the typical Lada to dealerships for approximately $4,800; the dealer would then sell the same car to the consumer for around $7,500, leaving Avtovaz “bleeding cash and piling on debt,” while the dealer raked in an almost 50 percent markup. Not only did Berezovsky make a tremendous profit from markups—he financed his operations with the manufacturer’s own money: Typically, domestic consumers would pay for cars upfront, but dealers would not pay Avtovaz for the cars until after they had already been sold. By delaying payments—particularly during times of rapid inflation—the dealer kept his pockets stuffed full of other people’s cash. Another of Berezovsky’s trademark schemes was his “re-export” strategy, in which he would alter documentation in order to make it look like he was exporting cars out of Russia, affording him lower prices from Avtovaz, then “import” them back into Russia and receive dollars for the cars he sold. It also didn’t hurt that the Avtovaz chairman, its head of finance, and its head of aftersale service each owned substantial stock in Logovaz. Top executives at Avtovaz benefitted


77 Ibid.
personally from dealing with Berezovsky’s Logovaz, themselves engaging in corrupt business operations.

Avtovaz produced more than 700,000 cars annually, oftentimes duplicating vehicle identification numbers in order to avoid paying taxes. In total, it is estimated that this fraudulent business cost the federal budget approximately $600 million. Yet given the lawlessness of the time, the company had to do what it could to stay afloat. It was not uncommon for car parts, and even entire cars, to be purloined—oftentimes directly off of the assembly line. Workers’ salaries were so low that the theft and resale of car parts proved more profitable than gainful employment. And indeed, the corruption was well guarded: In 1994, Radik Yakutian, the head of the investigative department of the Samara Region’s prosecutor’s office, was assassinated while investigating Avtovaz’s practices. Paul Klebnikov, the Russian-American journalist and Forbes reporter who made a successful career out of investigating Russia’s oligarchs, was assassinated outside of Forbes’ Moscow office in 2004. Although his murder has not been solved definitively, it is widely assumed that his investigation of the murder of Vladislav Listyev, for which Berezovsky was a suspect, played a strong role in his killing. Even as early as 1997, when the Ministry of Internal Affairs carried out “Operation Cyclone” and raided Avtovaz, the combined effort by the prosecutor’s office and the tax police uncovered evidence that the “businessmen” associated with the manufacturer had carried out no fewer than 65 murders of company managers, dealers, and business rivals.

This embezzlement, tax evasion, and violence also characterized Berezovsky’s ventures in the oil, airline, and television industries. In the early 1990s, Berezovsky took control of the oil giant Sibneft for $100 million, which was well below its estimated value at the time, in addition to presiding over a large stake of Aeroflot, the Soviet Union’s premier airline.\(^80\) As Paul Klebnikov wrote in 1999:

> Aeroflot was one of the crown jewels of the Russian industry. It had landing rights all over the world, relatively new aircraft and a steady stream of foreign exchange revenues… Aeroflot, in short, was a plum, and Berezovsky, with his connections to President Yeltsin’s family, was in a position to take control.\(^81\)

After ousting Aeroflot’s old management team, Berezovsky put his own associates in place and began shuffling money back and forth within a network of companies that Berezovsky controlled. Aeroflot’s foreign offices were ordered to “remit up to 80 percent of their foreign currency revenues to Andava S. A.,”\(^82\) an obscure financial company in Lausanne, Switzerland. Through a complicated scheme in which interest rates, commissions, and currency exchanges were manipulated in Aeroflot’s favor, Berezovsky proceeded to amass great wealth through the company, which later became known mainly for its unsafe flying record and the shoddy conditions of its planes. Through his other companies, he also purchased shares in Nezavisimaia Gazeta and Kommersant, as well as television networks ORT and TV6—media enterprises that would prove

---


\(^82\) Ibid.
beneficial for advancing his political interests. Combined, Berezovsky’s corrupt business activities gave rise to spaces in which criminal activity became standard practice, and where Berezovsky, as an increasingly rich and powerful man, was at once envied and abhorred.

But his mapping of the Russian market does not stand alone: Through his longtime relationship with Boris Yeltsin and his chief of staff, Berezovsky worked his way into the president’s inner circle, gaining considerable political power and influence, and affirming the hierarchical and competitive system that the Soviet political apparatus had become. Realizing the financial and political benefits that a Yeltsin presidency could provide, Berezovsky used his control over Russia’s media networks to slander Yeltsin’s opponents and all but guarantee his reelection in 1996. He and his fellow businessmen are said to have also bankrolled Yeltsin’s campaign, spending over $140 million when the legal limit for each party was only $3 million. As Forbes reported in 1996:

> As in the U.S., most people in Russia who give big money to political campaigns hope for favors. The difference is that in Russia the payoff is often direct… The fox now guards the chickens.

Yeltsin, who was rarely sober enough to make his own decisions, let alone conduct official, presidential business, rewarded Berezovsky for his contributions by appointing him deputy secretary of the National Security Council, then secretary of the Organization for Coordinating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). And in 1999, Berezovsky won a seat in the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, for the poverty-

---


stricken southern republic of Karachaev-Cherkessia. Such posts would later prove advantageous by providing Berezovsky with diplomatic immunity from prosecution. Similar to the ways in which Avtovaz associates owned stock in Logovaz, it also didn’t hurt that Yeltsin’s immediate family had stakes in some of Berezovsky’s businesses. That the president’s son-in-law had been directly involved in money laundering at Aeroflot would make it difficult to prosecute Berezovsky without also exposing the corruption of Yeltsin and his kin.

Given the cornucopia of scandalous practices that were at the heart of Berezovsky’s political and business careers, it is of little wonder that public reactions to his activities have been generally negative and that they have in many respects served as a springboard for Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. As Berezovsky continues to promote himself as a staunch defender of democracy and capitalism, public perceptions of the “free market” continue to flounder in the new Russia, as well. Berezovsky has lived in self-imposed exile in London since 2000, when his relationship with Putin (whom he helped get elected) soured. In 2007, he was tried in absentia and sentenced to six years in prison for embezzlement at Aeroflot. Then again in 2009, Berezovsky was sentenced to thirteen years for defrauding Avtovaz and was ordered to pay 58 million rubles ($1.9 million) in compensation. As efforts to extradite him back to Moscow continue to prove unsuccessful, Berezovsky ridicules his trial as an anti-democratic “farce” and calls for Vladimir Putin to be ousted from office—by force, if necessary. He has harshly accused Putin of rolling back democratic freedoms in Russia—the same “freedoms” that enabled

---

Berezovsky to earn his millions, which he quickly funneled out of Russia and into foreign banks. In a 2000 interview with Gregory Feifer, a fellow of the Institute for Current World Affairs, Berezovsky stated: “The main goal is to maintain what we’ve achieved in the last ten years—sometimes with great difficulties—which is a truly democratic state.” Such criticisms have only grown louder over the years, particularly after Berezovsky had absconded to London and no longer feared Putin’s wrath:

In spring and summer 2000 Putin initiated the first step in his plan to turn Russia away from the decentralization and diversification effected under Boris Yeltsin and back toward the strong central state we knew in Soviet times. In those months he signed a number of decrees dismantling independent centers of power that had been devolved to other branches of government and regions and restoring that power to the center. His aim was the opposite of democracy: to concentrate power in one hand—his own.

This 2004 criticism against Putin’s authoritative tendencies was amplified further in 2005, when Berezovsky accused the president of being a “terrorist” who was trying to reestablish Soviet centralization in Russia. Lamenting the loss of progress made during the Yeltsin administration, Berezovsky explains:

Putin has moved in another direction: He is trying to restore for Russia the same heavy-handed, centralized system of control just like the old Soviet Union was organized, including through his military campaign against the Chechens. This is his big mistake. It didn’t work for the Soviet Union and it won’t work for Russia.

But who is to say that it didn’t work for the Soviet Union? Clearly, the system had its faults and at times witnessed devastating consequences—consequences that are

86 Feifer, “Russia’s Real Rulers,” 82.


resurfacing with gusto in the contemporary period. But as popular nostalgia for the positive aspects of Soviet life indicates, the centralized and heavy-handed system that Putin’s policies have fostered may be constraining in many respects, but it may also promise a different sort of freedom that was woefully lacking in Berezovsky’s Russia.

This popular sentiment is particularly evident in Russian fiction and film, where Berezovsky has been both glamourized and not so subtly mocked. The most prominent portrayals of the oligarch include Yuli Dubov’s novel Bol’shaia Paika, (The Big Cut), and Pavel Lungin’s 2002 film Oligarkh (Tycoon), which is based on Dubov’s book. Dubov wrote his novel from first-hand experience as Berezovsky’s business partner, leading some critics to suggest that his account of Berezovsky’s life and activities may be in some ways guarded. Generally, however, the novel is deemed to be an accurate portrayal of the oligarch’s rise and decline. The film, which makes interesting use of time and space to create an aura of mystery and distance, is particularly successful in its ability to illustrate not only Berezovsky’s quick wit and driven nature, but also public reaction to his exploits. Although the names of the characters in the film differ from the real-life counterparts they represent, the resemblance of the main character Platon Makovsky to Berezovsky—who changed his name to Platon (Plato) Elenin while in exile in 2004—is unmistakable: Makovsky’s business, Infocar, is a direct reference to Berezovsky’s Logovaz; he later acquires a television channel through which the viewers get a peek at his highly orchestrated life and activities; and for much of the film, he is presumed to have been assassinated in a car bombing, similar to the event that nearly claimed the life of Berezovsky and decapitated his chauffer. The film poignantly demonstrates both the public fascination and the disdain that Russia’s oligarchs engendered, painting a vivid
picture of life in the lawless 1990s and sharply juxtaposing the bleak present with hopes for a better future. As Harley Balzer wrote in 2003:

New Russians, in short, present us with a dichotomous perception: on the one hand, they are people who have caught the wave of change, and turned it to their advantage; on the other hand, they are corrupt, boorish, and, unforgivably, illicitly rich.\(^8^9\)

Lungin’s film effectively captures both aspects of the oligarchs and post-Soviet life.

All events that take place in the film are positioned in relation to Makovsky’s death, which supposedly occurred shortly after government forces raided the headquarters of his business, Infocar. That Makovsky is presumed dead in the beginning of the film allows the entire story to be told by his associates, through their recollections of interactions with Makovsky and their descriptions of him and his life. As Lucy Fisher has aptly observed of the temporal dimensions of Lungin’s film:

[I]ts flashbacks are bizarrely interlocking and sometimes embedded within one another like Russian stacking-dolls, thus, creating a mystifying temporal enigma and conundrum for the spectator.\(^9^0\)

The film’s style in many respects represents the chaos and confusion of the time, while simultaneously juxtaposing a future without Makovsky (Berezovsky) with a present in which the oligarch essentially owned the post-Soviet space. This portrayal of Makovsky symbolizes the distance and omnipotence that surrounded Berezovsky’s life in Moscow—he is portrayed as an almost God-like figure, with his “disciples” eulogizing his most memorable qualities, and with the intricacies of his business practices only


brought to life through the experiences of others. Capitalism is the new object of worship, with a Jewish deity having given his life for promises of a future that is anything but Russian.

The scandalous nature of Makovsky’s endeavors is particularly revealed through an emphasis on the relationship between certain non-Russian aspects of his persona and the advent of Western style “freedom” in the new Russia. As the film flashes back to the time just before Makovsky’s death, a television reporter who is covering the government’s raid on Infocar explains that the state is attempting to demonstrate how “it no longer needs oligarchs,” pointing out that Makovsky’s net worth of $5 billion is not enough to spare him from such public humiliation. The oligarch responds by stating that “we are in Russia—my only crime is being a free man.” Meanwhile, groups of angry protestors shout for Makovsky to “go live in Israel,” while supporters of the Communist Party in traditional dress sing patriotic songs in celebration of the event and yell for Makovsky to “stop robbing the people.” Through a narrative that jumps back and forth between Makovsky’s life and the time just after his death, the film clearly portrays the oligarch’s lavish lifestyle: the yacht that he purposefully sinks, while his fellow ultra-wealthy passengers nonchalantly swim ashore (thankful that they at least salvaged the shishkebobs); the extravagant birthday party, where the oligarch makes his grand entrée atop an elephant and receives gifts that range from an Akhal Teke horse to a beauty queen wrapped in cellophane; and the lavish banquet-style meals over which Makovsky and his colleagues discuss their most recent business dealings. Interestingly, one of the characters in the film that demonstrates a sort of regret for this new Russia is the wife of Makovsky’s partner, Viktor. At Makovsky’s lavish birthday party, the woman chides the
men for stuffing their faces while the country starves. In a drunken tirade, she exclaims that she doesn’t eat caviar, but only drinks vodka—”vodka Rodina” and therefore is “with the people.” Taken together, the events in this film demonstrate both the envy and disdain surrounding Russia’s oligarchs, and Berezovsky in particular, serving as a kind of counterpoint to the narrative that that was being exclaimed loudly in everyday post-Soviet life.

Through a combination of his nefarious business endeavors and his enormous wealth and power, Berezovsky has etched out a heterotopic space in the post-Soviet context that has come to be viewed as selfishly opportunistic and fundamentally non-Russian. The fact that Berezovsky is Jewish also does little to generate sentiments of national belonging, as the majority of Russians identify as Orthodox Christian and oftentimes view people from other religious and ethnic backgrounds with skepticism, if not outright hostility. The claim is sometimes made that oligarchs have been targeted in Putin’s Russia because of their Jewish faith (many of Russia’s Jewish oligarchs, such as Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, have been severely reprimanded), while others argue that the role of religion has been exaggerated. Undoubtedly, both religious and ethnic minorities tend to be “feminized” in Russia—perceived as somehow weaker and less gallant than their “authentic” Russian counterparts, and therefore also less entitled to positions of power and prestige. Either way, it has been made clear that the men such as Berezovsky, who are perceived to have amassed wealth at the expense of the nation, or who have opposed Putin’s now idolized masculine prowess, are unwelcome in the contemporary Russian context. Conversely, as will be demonstrated next in a brief overview of Abramovich’s unique endeavors in the
Far East, those who have capitulated to Putin’s demands, and who are perceived to have contributed charitably to the common good, have fared well in the narrative of Putin’s Russia.

**Roman Abramovich and the Construction of a Utopian Ideal**

As Yuri Govorushko put it, “If money is no object, distance and time are, it seems, no problem.”\(^9\) Beginning in early childhood, Roman Abramovich’s life quickly became characterized by the transcendence of both space and time. Born in the Volga town of Saratov, Abramovich was orphaned at four years of age and sent to live with his grandparents in Moscow. He later moved to the Arctic region of Komi to stay with his uncle, who was an oil official, before going on to complete military service and then graduating from Moscow State Academy of Law.\(^9\) Taken under the wing of fellow now-notorious oligarch Boris Berezovsky, Abramovich dabbled in business projects that ranged from selling rubber ducks out of his Moscow apartment during *perestroika* to managing oil and pig farming companies. Having already made a fortune in tires and commodities trading by the time he reached his early 20s, Abramovich rapidly expanded his business empire: by 2003 (shortly after Berezovsky’s departure to London), he had acquired a nearly 80 percent stake in the oil company Sibneft, half of the aluminum monopoly RusAl, and 25 percent of Aeroflot, which still remained Russia’s principle airline carrier. In addition to these multiple business endeavors, Abramovich purchased

\(^9\) Yuri Govorushko, “Inside Russia: Roman’s Empire,” *Transitions Online* (2003). (Russia has since eliminated a time zone from its map.)

the Chelsea football club in 2003, vowing to watch every game. Yet amid this long list of
diverse political and economic undertakings, Abramovich’s most bizarre—and perhaps
most symbolic—pursuit was arguably his governance of Chukotka, one of Russia’s most
desolate and impoverished Far East regions. It has largely been this experiment with
governance that has bestowed upon Abramovich a reputation of benevolence in certain
circles while keeping him in good standing with Vladimir Putin, whose oil interests in the
region continue to expand.

At the behest of President Putin in 2001, Abramovich became governor of the
Chukchi Autonomous Okrug, which had been declining rapidly since the Soviet collapse
and the departure of military installations from the region in the late 1980s. The region,
which was then nine time zones away from Moscow (about 100 km above the Arctic
Circle) and had a meager population of 73,000, was “the most socio-economically
distressed of the Russian Federation’s 89 regions after war-torn Chechnya.”93 At the time
that Abramovich was elected as governor with 92 percent of the vote, most of the houses
in Chukotka lacked hot water and indoor plumbing; the electricity supply was sporadic,
and “other than vodka, radio [was] the only source of entertainment.”94 According to
Yuri Zarakhovich, Chukotka looked like “a handful of undersized building blocks tossed
across the featureless tundra.”95 Consequently, over the first three years of his tenure in
office, Abramovich paid for the construction of forty-six new homes at $50,000 each, in

93 Niobe Thompson, “Migration and Resettlement in Chukotka: A Research Note,”

94 Yuri Zarakhovich, “Meet the Second Richest Man in Russia,” Time Europe 160, no. 23
(2002).

95 Ibid.
addition to financing the construction of hotels, movie theaters, bowling alleys, supermarkets, an indoor skating rink (because outdoor temperatures, which sometimes dip as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit, are too cold for outdoor skating) and a public bath-barbershop. Perhaps most importantly, he ensured that the salaries of public sector workers were paid on time—something that had not happened since long before the downfall of the Soviet regime. To subsidize many of these projects, Abramovich reached into his own pocket (primarily through his investment company, Millhouse Capital), giving people whose subsistence derived mainly from reindeer herding new opportunities and an increased standard of living. He even paid personally to send approximately 8,500 children on vacation to the Black Sea, offering them an escape from Russia’s brutal “summerless Far East”—all to the tune of approximately $200-$300 million.96

Some villagers reportedly bowed before Abramovich and wept at the improvements that the new governor had bestowed upon their tiny enclave. He had literally built a semi-modern city out of one of the most desolate regions of Russia, which in many respects had been hit hardest by years of Soviet decline and post-Soviet neglect. As reported by The Guardian in 2004: “The identikit image being pieced together for us was of a self-made man who was not only powerful and wealthy, but acutely aware of those who had done less well in the tumultuous 1990s, when the Soviet Union fell.”97 Abramovich’s spokesman, John A. Mann, echoed this claim:

96 Ibid.

Roman’s [sic] changed the lives of 70,000 people in his province, Chukotka. They used to be starving and now they all have Dolby Surround Sound. Do you think they’re complaining? But for Roman it’s not an ego thing.98

Yet this modernization project has also given rise to questions regarding Abramovich’s motives and his treatment of the indigenous residents. While some villagers were cheering Abramovich’s reforms and thanking him for his generosity, others quietly voiced contempt for being treated as inferior citizens, and for the ways in which Abramovich forcefully changed their way of life. Indeed, a few of his efforts to “bring ‘civilized life’ to the ‘end of geography’” have been humorously unsuccessful. In one instance, bands that were flown in to perform at an ice fishing contest complained about the cold weather and lip-synched all of their songs, while local police officers dozed off in a heated jeep, failing to control the throng of young people who battled to gain entrance to the concert hall. In some ways, the line that distinguished modernization from colonialism in Chukotka was at times a sketchy one.

Abramovich’s “modernizing” projects were also accompanied by controversial migration policies, which would generate further animosity among the town’s more senior residents. At the time of his election victory, his administration’s officials proposed for Chukotka an ideal population target of 30,000-35,000, which would be composed mostly of younger residents. Pensioners were therefore encouraged to move out of Chukotka, both in order to alleviate the financial burden on the younger generation and so that the elderly residents could be closer to the center, where they could, in principle, receive appropriate health and housing services. Understandably, this

98 Ibid.
resettlement program generated a substantial amount of negative publicity in Chukotka, as well as in the resettled colonies and in the broader national media.\textsuperscript{99} For a majority of Chukotka’s inhabitants, residence in the region was viewed as service to the Motherland, which “should be compensated by considerable material inducements to living in the North.”\textsuperscript{100} Having worked in their communities for essentially their entire lives, many residents—particularly of the older generation—were not only accustomed to the harsh weather and landscape; they had also developed strong friendships and memories in the region. The idea that they should simply pick up and move to a different location struck a decidedly dissonant note. Yet even in light of this rather oppressive initiative, Abramovich continued to be hailed publically as a hero for his seemingly benevolent actions in the region. He had expanded the new Russian space to the farthest reaches of the map, and in so doing, demonstrated the powerful and unified nation-state that Russia could become, while simultaneously making clear that oligarchs could have a potentially beneficial impact on post-Soviet life.

Why did Abramovich undertake this stint as governor in Russia’s least hospitable climate, and what do his actions reveal about the oligarchs’ role in constructing a post-Soviet space? As governor, his annual salary hovered around a mere $11,500, which reportedly included an “Arctic bonus.”\textsuperscript{101} Although this salary was more than acceptable for Russian standards, it was hardly pocket change for a man who was already a well-

\textsuperscript{99} Thompson, “Migration and Resettlement in Chukotka: A Research Note,” 77.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 77.

established billionaire. Some commentators have suggested that Abramovich has political ambitions, which he felt could be bolstered by a bout of governance in one of Russia’s most desolate regions. Other suggest that he was trying to make good with Kremlin officials such as Putin, who had recently begun to appoint governors to Russia’s regions rather than allowing them to be elected to office. As an elected official, Abramovich would also be immune to prosecution for some of his less gallant practices. Or perhaps, for a man who perceived himself as having few limitations or challenges, this trek into the Far East was simply a test of his capability and omnipotence. As Abramovich once commented, “It’s a new endeavor for me. I’ve never run a territory. I’ve never publically talked to people. I’ve got to try it just to see whether I like it.”

Yet as Russia’s oil interests continue to expand in the Far East, it becomes increasingly apparent that Abramovich was backing the Kremlin’s efforts to map out territory that would enable the country to keep its economy, propped up by petro dollars, buoyantly afloat.

Presently, Abramovich’s most pressing problem seems to be that of figuring out where to park his 530-foot yacht, “Eclipse,” which is reportedly so large that it cannot be docked at a standard berth. The space that the oligarch has carved out for himself has enabled him to share his time between Russia and glamorous locations abroad, continuing his contribution to the national good through charitable donations to the arts, the Orthodox Church, and Russia’s sports scene. As the New York Times reported in 2008, Abramovich’s National Football Academy, which “aims to develop Russian soccer

102 Quoted from Zarakhovich.

and support the national team,” has a budget of approximately $60 million.\textsuperscript{104} His fashion model girlfriend, Daria Zhukova (daughter of oil magnate Alexander Radkin Zhukov and the mother of Abramovich’s sixth child), founded in 2008 the IRIS foundation, which is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to the promotion of contemporary culture. Through the foundation, Zhukova has become a prominent figure on the Moscow art scene. Abramovich has also purchased a 200-acre ranch in Snowmass, Colorado for $36.4 million, which is reportedly located just minutes away from the $11.8 million “ski-in, ski-out” house that he purchased two months earlier.\textsuperscript{105} Although Abramovich has shuttled substantial portions of his wealth out of Russia and into foreign investments, he apparently has also navigated and contributed to the post-Soviet space in acceptable ways. He has not always used his wealth in a way that appeals equally to all, but he has at least displayed a modicum of charity toward Russia and has refrained from directly challenging the popularity of Vladimir Putin, thereby enabling him to live both within and outside of Russia freely. As will be demonstrated next, charity work is only acceptable when it is not tainted with Western inclinations, and when the source of such generosity refrains from challenging the authority of the state. The actions of Mikhail Khodorkovsky etch out powerfully boundaries in Russia that are not to be transgressed.


Out of the three oligarchs herein discussed, Mikhail Khodorkovsky is in many respects the anomaly. Like the other two, Khodorkovsky built for himself a lucrative career out of the remnants of the declining Soviet system. And like his contemporaries, he engaged in devious practices that stand in direct opposition to what is now considered to be legal, legitimate activity. Yet in addition to his capitalist pursuits, Khodorkovsky was also an adamant proponent of Western-style democracy and a robust civil society. He dedicated much of his wealth to charity within Russia, and was, in many respects, poised to become a powerful political figure in the post-Yeltsin era. And for this political ambition, which came to fruition at the same time that Putin was consolidating his power and cracking down on the oligarch class, Khodorkovsky has been severely reprimanded. His oil company, Yukos, was carved up and appropriated by the state as Khodorkovsky was put on trial for the same crimes that everyone else in his circle had also committed. He was forcefully removed from his position of power and prestige, only to be relocated to a space of a different type—one that began in the small glass “aquarium,” as he called it, where he sat throughout his trials for tax evasion and fraud, then to a cell in the Far East where he would spend the bulk of his time sewing prison uniforms and anticipating, hopelessly, the date of his next appeal. Unlike the experience of Berezovsky, Khodorkovsky’s downfall was due in large part to his liberal tendencies and Western leanings; and unlike the case of Abramovich, it can be attributed to his failure to acquiesce to Putin’s authority. Surprisingly, Khodorkovsky’s legal affairs generated little attention in Russia, as the majority of the population approved of his imprisonment and believed, it seems, that his trial was generally fair.
Born on June 26, 1963, to a Jewish father and an Orthodox Christian mother, Khodorkovsky graduated in 1986 from Moscow’s Mendeleev Institute of Chemical Technologies, where he studied and excelled at chemical engineering. While at university, Khodorkovsky served as deputy head of the Komsomol (the Communist Youth League), where he made a number of professionally advantageous connections. Ironically, it was out of this communist background that Khodorkovsky emerged as a champion for free market enterprise, and which enabled him to begin re-sketching the Russian business landscape. His membership with the communist organization allowed him to travel abroad, which was when, as Martin Sixsmith reports: Khodorkovsky “found the capitalist world far removed from the evil stereotypes he and his generation had been fed by the Kremlin.”  

Consequently, as the state’s grip over the economy loosened during Gorbachev’s policies of perestroika and glasnost, Khodorkovsky and one of his Komsomol associates, Alexi Golubovich, opened a private café at their local Komsomol headquarters. The café, which was funded largely by the State Bank of the USSR where Golubovich’s parents conveniently worked, was visited most frequently by the Komsomol’s well-connected directors. It became an instant success, in many ways rendering the biography of Khodorkovsky as synonymous with Russia’s grand entrée into its precarious experiment with capitalism.

Under Gorbachev’s new perestroika policies, a clause existed that enabled educational institutions to form research and development centers in specialized fields.


107 Ibid., 19.
Recognizing the potential that this clause might engender, Khodorkovsky founded the “Center for Inter-Industry Scientific and Technical Progress,” known in Russian by its acronym, Menatep. The purpose of the enterprise was “to conduct market research for large manufacturers and introduce them to new technologies”\footnote{"About Mikhail Khodorkovsky," Khodorkovsky and Lebedev Communications Center (2011), http://www.khodorkovskycenter.com/about-khodorkovsky-and-lebedev/about-khodorkovsky (accessed July 5, 2011).} for, of course, handsome fees that translated into even more attractive profits. Menatep would eventually become the financial center of Russia’s oil giant Yukos, which would lead to both tremendous wealth and the ultimate downfall of Khodorkovsky. As business at Menatep began to expand, Khodorkovsky realized the necessity of expanding his team, bringing on board Leonid Nezvlin and Mikhail Brudno. Rumor has it that Nezvlin and Brudno, who were both Jewish, were deeply resentful for their treatment under the Soviet system and consequently were eager to break from the past as Khodorkovsky’s business partners.\footnote{Sixsmith, Putin’s Oil: The Yukos Affair and the Struggle for Russia, 21.}

Khodorkovsky’s third associate, Platon Lebedev, was slightly older than the others and also anxious to break with Russia’s communist past; in breaking with this past, Lebedev would see Khodorkovsky through an abbreviated yet enormously successful career—before following his business partner to prison in snowy Siberia.


Siberian oil fields, and by 2003, the company’s capitalization was approaching $30 billion.\(^{111}\) As Vadim Volkov points out, the company’s growth can be attributed mainly to the rise in oil prices after 1999, large foreign investments, elaborate tax schemes, and the “creation of an efficient management structure with the highest proportion of foreign citizens among the top management and shareholders of any Russian company.”\(^{112}\) In 2003, Yukos reportedly paid $3 billion and 26 percent of its stock for 92 percent of Sibneft,\(^{113}\) creating Russia’s largest oil company and the fourth largest company in the world. This merger resulted in a company with vast reserves and a greatly increased share of oil production, which soon began negotiations to sell a large portion of its shares to US investors such as ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco.

By increasing the company’s size, introducing international transparency standards, and involving foreign investors, Khodorkovsky was clearly moving toward a much stronger and independent position vis-à-vis the state, perhaps strong enough to be able to ignore the implicit contract.\(^{114}\)

Although concerns began to mount with regard to Khodorkovsky’s own wealth and political ambitions, the ties that he was developing with the West were perhaps even more alarming to both the Kremlin and to other Russian onlookers who were already fearful of the non-Russian influence that continued to creep across the borders. The idea that the West could gain control of Russian oil fields and pipelines, or that capital would

\(^{111}\) Volkov, “Standard Oil and Yukos in the Context of Early Capitalism in the United States and Russia,” 258.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) Ibid.
be sent abroad, sat uneasily with politicians in Moscow. And despite Khodorkovsky’s more charitable side, he was still an oligarch who was viewed with suspicion and disdain by much of the Russian population.

On July 2, 2003, billionaire Platon Lebedev, chair of the Board of Directors of Menatep, was arrested and charged with financial fraud that dated back to the 1993-94 privatization of the phosphate-producing plant Apatit; he was also charged with tax evasion by Menatep subsidiaries in Tomsk Oblast.115 Then on October 25, Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested and charged with fraud, tax evasion, and theft. The General Procuracy froze 44 percent of Yukos stock, most of which belonged to Khodorkovsky and his associates. And following year, the Federal Taxation Ministry “filed $27.5 billion in tax claims against Yukos for unpaid taxes and fines.”116 In fewer than one and a half years, Russian federal authorities auctioned off the oil mining company Yuganskneftegaz, which produced 62 percent of Yukos’s oil for $9.35 billion. In turn, the company was snapped up by the state oil company Rosneft for less than $30,000.117 The final nail was driven into the coffin when Lebedev and Khodorkovsky were each, after a long, humiliating, and widely publicized trial, handed eight-year prison sentences in remote corners of Siberia. Combined, the events made clear, in no uncertain terms, who was in charge in the new Russia. Putin had promised to clamp down on the oligarchs, and in Khodorkovsky’s case, he did so with enthusiasm. The stakes that Khodorkovsky controlled in Russia’s most lucrative industry, combined with the possible political

115 Ibid., 241.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
challenge that he posed to Putin, gave Putin cause to reclaim his space and make a public example out of Khodorkovsky and his Western inclinations.

Although Khodorkovsky engaged in many of the same shady business practices of his wealthy compatriots, it was his philanthropy and ardent promotion of Western-style democracy that differentiated him from the rest of the pack. Khodorkovsky created summer camps for children (mostly orphans), as well as Internet training centers for teachers, and forums in which journalists could openly discuss issues of Russian democratic reform. He promoted philanthropic programs through Yukos in areas where the company operated, some of which involved support of student governments. Critics oftentimes chastised such efforts as political posturing, as Khodorkovsky had also become one of the most vocal critics of what he referred to as “managed democracy.” Aware of the potential consequences of voicing opposition to Putin directly, Khodorkovsky initially limited his criticism to the security services and media, but later would clash with Vladimir Putin in ways that would prove detrimental. He is oftentimes referred to by his supporters as a dissident for his efforts to oppose what some people see as centralized authority under Putin. But as Susan Glasser and Peter Baker point out:

> [T]he idea of a dissident with overseas bank accounts and an army of lawyers and publicists writing blogs and Twitter feeds on his behalf from safe quarters in London and Washington seems paradoxical.¹¹⁸

Khodorkovsky is no modern-day Solzhenitsyn, and as polls indicate, most Russians were happy to see him go.

---

When respondents were asked in 2005 if they would vote for Khodorkovsky if he were to be included on a list of candidates, 57 percent said “probably not / definitely not,” compared to the meager 28 percent of respondents who indicated that they would “definitely” or “probably” vote for him. And interestingly, for all of the international hubbub that surrounded Khodorkovsky’s trial and imprisonment, 77 percent of survey respondents indicated that they did not intentionally follow reporting on the trial of Khodorkovsky and Lebedev, and only 9 percent blamed Putin for their arrests. Most respondents were undecided about who was responsible for Khodorkovsky’s arrest, while 23 percent named the Attorney General. The space that Khodorkovsky had begun to carve out for himself elicited support and sympathy from some Russian citizens; but for others, it served to reinforce Russia’s need for a strong state and a style of democracy that was uniquely Russian. That Khodorkovsky was sent to a modern-day “Gulag” in many respects reiterates the link between criminality, capitalism, and unfavorable masculinities in the post-Soviet context. Khodorkovsky epitomized Western democratic ideas and everything that would presumably come with them—crime, consumerism, and overt, diseased, “unnatural” sexual inclinations. Despite his charitable undertakings, his endeavors directly opposed the collectivist mentality that had framed the Soviet experience for the past seventy years. Democracy and capitalism were non-Russian imports, promising a future of hierarchy and inequality rather than freedom through the collective and a dedication to the common good.


Conclusion: Heterotopic Masculinities and the Limitations of Post-Soviet “Freedom”

As Alec Rasizade has pointed out:

[I]t is self-evident how the colossal enrichment of the few, while the overwhelming majority were cast in poverty, explains the oligarchs’ unpopularity and the truism that democracy and a free market became in Russia synonymous with disorder, corruption, larceny and injustice.121

The “New Russians” who worked at corporate head offices, banks, and at media enterprises earned an estimated $5,000 to $20,000 per month, while the “legions of workers at the host of bureaucratic, scientific, educational, cultural and other institutions established in Moscow for the needs of the Soviet superpower”122 were oftentimes paid less than $100 per month, which was well below the cost of living in Moscow. And of course, Abramovich, Berezovsky, and Khodorkovsky are only three tycoons out of many who amassed great wealth and power during a lawless and chaotic time: Antoly Chubais, who orchestrated Russia’s privatization process, is oftentimes blamed for the devastating economic decline of the post-Soviet period. Oleg Deripaska, Russia’s aluminum, construction, and car industry magnate, became Russia’s first billionaire at age thirty-five. Known previously for his loyalty to the Kremlin, Deripaska became targeted by Putin in 2009 amid unrest in Pikalevo, a town in which Deripaska owns cement factories. The leader likened Deripaska to a cockroach and ordered him to pay all outstanding wages owed.123 Then there is Vladimir Gusinsky, the media magnate who was awarded


122 Ibid. 10.

Russia’s first private television network, NTV and the media conglomerate Media-Most, which included a series of radio stations, magazines, and a satellite communications network. Gusinsky was arrested in 2000 amid charges of tax evasion, although the arrest is widely seen as politically motivated. His television network was taken over by the now state-owned Gazprom in compensation for debts owed.

For most of the oligarchs who emerged on the scene upon the disintegration of the Soviet regime—those previously mentioned, as well as men such as Vladimir Potanin, Mikhail Prokhorov, Mikhail Fridman, and many others—the lawlessness and corruption of the time became a normal, everyday reality. It is likely that each of them engaged in the kinds of questionable business practices that have sent some into exile and others into prison. And it isn’t as though the government itself has been a knight in shining armor. As Marshall Goldman put it, “Yukos may have been guilty as charged, but state authorities have not behaved much better.”124 Undoubtedly, the arrests and retribution that have been handed down by the Kremlin have been politically motivated, as Vladimir Putin has endeavored to establish, and then maintain, his grip on power and his influence over Russia’s ever-expanding economy. Nevertheless, the oligarchs’ abilities to navigate the political terrain of an increasingly authoritarian leadership have also served as litmus tests not only for determining the boundaries of acceptable behavior, but also for sketching out a broader picture of what it means to be Russian, and more specifically, a Russian man in the post-Soviet context. The spaces that the oligarchs’ activities have comprised and reactions to those spaces point to ideas of individual and collective

freedom that continue to be renegotiated in the post-Soviet space—freedoms that speak directly to ideas of both Russianness and “normal,” or “natural,” masculine Subjectivity.

The downfall of a powerful empire in which the pursuit of individual ambition was eclipsed by the development of a common good, and where men and women had found their places within a symbolic order dedicated to the pursuit of a future communist utopia, revealed a gaping lack of both individual and national identity that has not been easily fulfilled. The influx of Western incarnations of capitalism and democracy that accompanied the dissolution of the Soviet Union have sat uneasily with many Russians who have come to equate such imports not as the ticket to freedom, but rather as presenting a new set of limiting constraints and as fundamentally non-Russian. After all, unlike other developing countries such as China, Russia has historically had no substantial experience with a market economy; in fact, the constraints that were perceived to be a product of capitalism were anathema to the development of a communist society in which people would, according to the dictates of Marxism-Leninism, truly be free.

Much in the same way that the New Soviet Man embodied the power and prestige of the now-defunct empire, the oligarchs came to embody, and in many respects constitute, this capitalist “freedom” in the new Russia. Through their scandalous business practices, hierarchical political cronyism, and their pursuit of individual prosperity at the expense of the common good, the “businessmen” who made a fortune during an opportune and lawless time came to comprise heterotopic spaces in new symbolic orders of Russianness that simultaneously opposed both the failed utopia of Soviet communism and generated desires for the construction of a more stable, unified future. They represented everything that Russia was not, and in so doing, contributed in large part to
the ascendance of the centrepitalizing and moralizing principles of Putin and the Orthodox Church, which have begun to marshal new and consequential understandings of both Russianness and masculine Subjectivity in the post-Soviet context. The Fatherland has been remapped in ways that were not in any way predetermined or predictable, but which will undoubtedly continue to alter Ideas of Russianness for years to come.
CHAPTER TWO

VLADIMIR PUTIN AND THE BODY POLITIC: THE COALESCENCE OF CORPOREALITY AND TEMPORALITY IN PUTIN’S RUSSIA

“I want a man like Putin, who’s full of strength. I want a man like Putin, who doesn’t drink. I want a man like Putin, who won’t make me sad. I want a man like Putin, who won’t run away…”

Produced by amateur songwriter Alexander Yelin in 2002 on a $300 bet, the song “A Man Like Putin” (Takogo kak Putin) became an instant pop-culture success. In a video that combines techno-pop style music with a contemporary slant on Russian propaganda, a Putin impersonator named Anatoly Gorbunov and a man who is presumably Yelin watch another video of two attractive young women from the band “Singing Together” (Poiushchie Vmeste), singing the praises of Vladimir Putin. Fed up with their boyfriends who drink and fight, the women declare their desire for someone like Putin and praise the leader for his strong, responsible demeanor. The women’s singing, which takes place against a backdrop of the red, blue, and white Russian national flag, is interwoven with footage of Putin at his inauguration, signing official legislation, and practicing judo, while patriotic imagery such as gilded Orthodox cupolas and the grandeur of the Moscow Kremlin provide an aura of opulence and might. In the end, “Putin” indicates his admiration for the song, winking to the camera, signaling thumbs up, and congratulating the director with a hip handshake of approval.

125 For full lyrics, see: Takogo kak Putin, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OFOPd6pgjI.
Despite the initial ambivalence of local DJs and television producers to broadcast a song that they feared might offend the president, *A Man Like Putin* soon flooded the airwaves. Supporters of Putin played the song in nightclubs and at karaoke bars, and to many people’s surprise, the president himself took a liking to the song, playing it regularly at official rallies during his second bid for office. Not everyone has shared this enthusiasm for *A Man Like Putin*, which has been perceived by some as emblematic of the leader’s increasingly autocratic dominance over Russian media outlets and his largely unopposed political ascendance. And as evidenced by the protests that took place across Russia in advance of the 2012 presidential elections, skepticism of Putin’s authenticity and questions over his preferred place in Russian society and politics has been growing precipitously.\(^{126}\) Yet by mockingly endowing the president with many of the qualities that Russia (and Russian men) so desperately lacked, the song appealed to citizens who had grown disillusioned by the hardships of post-Soviet life—and particularly to women, who had become dismayed by the lack of strength, stability, and dependability of their husbands and boyfriends. As a young and confident leader, President Vladimir Putin represented what the ideal man should be. And by extension, he embodied the powerful nation that Russia could once again become.

Emerging from the rubble of a once robust empire, the inceptive Russian nation-state became characterized not by emancipation from the repressive yoke of communism, but rather by weakness, fragmentation, and a profound inability to act. Economically devastated, the body politic that had been united paradoxically by both the pursuit of a

\(^{126}\) Although Putin’s approval rating dropped rather dramatically with the 2011 protests, as of January 2012, he and his party, United Russia, remained the top choice among likely voters.
future Soviet utopia and the hardships of Soviet life became riddled with crime, corruption, and a loss of collective identity. Lacking the might of a powerful Fatherland, Russia was prostituted out to the West both economically and culturally, as its borders were redrawn and its national character redefined.127 And the difficulties that the end of Soviet rule in 1991 engendered persisted throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium: The 1998 economic collapse and consequent devaluation of the ruble left Russia’s economy further devastated and the state with virtually no middle class, leading to a sense of hopelessness and fear over what the future may hold. Russia’s humiliating defeat in the Chechen war of 1994, the Moscow apartment bombings in 1999, and the hostage takings at the Dubrovka Theater and in Beslan highlighted Russia’s weakness and reasserted the necessity of bolstering national security and collective self-sufficiency. Coupled with a rapid influx of prostitution, pornography, and the hyper-sexualization of women, events such as these constituted a time of unprecedented change—change that threw into disarray any coherent conception of Russianness, while simultaneously inscribing itself onto the male body in particular and consequential ways.

A handful of men who were either well connected politically or who happened to be in the right place at the right time during Russia’s haphazardly orchestrated process of privatization became instantly wealthy, giving rise to a class of New Russians—the so-called “oligarchs” who quickly became known for their enormous private homes, beautiful wives and girlfriends, and “their own well-fed and pampered bodies.”128

127 Borenstein, Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture.

Adorned with opulent symbols of Western-style individualism, their bodies exuded signs of wealth and power that contrasted starkly with the rest of the male population. After all, the majority of men, suddenly finding themselves out of work and without many options, turned instead to the bottle and relied on their more resilient wives for financial support. On the bodies of these men became inscribed the hardships of everyday life: excessive alcoholism, drug use, and the disappearance of state-sponsored health care capped the life expectancy at a dismal fifty-seven for most of the 1990s; crime and violence, which had become commonplace in the post-Soviet period, claimed the lives of many at an early age; and the displacement of the pension system left neglected veterans of the Afghan war (Russia’s Vietnam) sitting hopelessly on city streets.

The crumbling of Soviet institutions, which became indelibly inscribed on the bodies of those who endured the hardships of the time, simultaneously contributed to a radical reconsideration of what constituted “normal” or “natural” masculinity in the post-Soviet period. Following the repeal of Article 121, which had banned sex between men in the Soviet Union, a prominent gay masculinity began to assert its presence in Soviet, then Russian society. Although life was in many ways more difficult for people who became suddenly visible but remained largely unaccepted, the appearance of gay bars and clubs, sex shops, and glossy publications such as Sobaka (Dog), Kvir (Queer) and GQ Russia helped to foster a burgeoning new community, which, by challenging the state-mandated asexuality of the Soviet period, has required all men to readjust their conceptualizations of masculinity, sexuality, and the male body. As Luc Beaudoin put it in 2011:

129 See Prokhorova, “The Post-Utopian Body Politic.”
Russian men need gayness to define themselves. Masculine queerness glorifies the male body through which men now see themselves, and reflects the limitations of society today: whether porn stars, transvestites, transsexuals, poets, or self-identified heterosexual literary and cultural figures, all use the queer gaze to reset the definition of the Russian man.\textsuperscript{130}

This framing of masculinity, which is not dependent upon dominance over or submission to women, has challenged “traditional” understandings of what men should be, while simultaneously constituting an important new dimension of Russianness.

Both grotesque and beautiful, pampered, diseased, and sexualized, the male body has come to signify the complexities of Russianness in the post-Soviet period, serving as a terrain upon which society is mapped: a society in which Orthodox Christianity competes for popularity with the pornography that flows freely online and in metro stations; where devout Russian\textit{babushkas} stand alongside ultra-nationalist skinheads in opposition to still fledgling gay rights movements; and where wealthy, Western-style “businessmen” serve as constant reminders of the individualistic consumerism that has become the nemesis of those who long for a return to the stability and predictability that Soviet institutions provided. The body has become a living representation of the possibilities and prohibitions of post-Soviet Russia, making directly visible the changes and contradictions that characterize life after communism. Such changes and contradictions, underscored by both the popularity and disdain that have developed around President, then Prime Minister Putin, shine a glaring light on Russia’s stultified quest to map out both a new national Idea and a redefined masculine Subjectivity—two concepts that had become inextricably fused during both pre-Soviet Russia and the Soviet

\textsuperscript{130} Beaudoin, \textit{The (Homo)Sexualization of Russian Masculinity}, 13-14.
period, but which so far have failed to be worked out in the uncharted context of contemporary Russia.

As an unlikely choice for president, Putin faced an onerous set of tasks upon his ascendance to office in December 1999: stabilize and rehabilitate the economy; protect and defend Russia from terrorist threats (particularly from neighboring regions of Chechnya and Dagestan); revive and restore dignity to the political apparatus; and perhaps most importantly, generate a renewed sense of identity and purpose among an otherwise disunited Russian populace. And through his multifarious strategies, Putin has largely succeeded in plucking Russia from the ruins of its shattered empire and engendering a semblance of stability and hope for the future. Fueled by Russia’s oil boom, the economy has grown by an average of 7 percent per year since 1998, resulting in an increased standard of living for many citizens. And although Russia’s political apparatus is still widely plagued by corruption and cronyism, it has assumed greater stability and regularity than it exhibited in the 1990s, which has contributed to an enhanced sense of security. Whether or not successes such as these are directly attributable to Putin, they were reflected in the leader’s approval rating, which, during most of his tenure his office, hovered between 70-80 percent. As Rafael Khachaturian remarked in 2009, “In the eyes of many Russians, Putin represents a stabilizing force,

---

132 According to most sources, the approval rating has fluctuated between 60-85 percent.
ready and able to advance the national interest after the country was eclipsed by the West for too long.”\textsuperscript{133}

For Putin, this advancement of the national interest involved reclaiming a Russia that to many people had been lost. Much in the same way that the Orthodox Church has posited a return to “traditional” Orthodox teachings and practices as central to ensuring the future salvation of Russia, Putin sought to revive in Russia some of the historically mythologized characteristics that make it unique—against the foreign vulgarity of Western discourse—and predicated the nation-state’s future success on this reestablishment of Russian patriotism. Although Putin declared that he was “against the restoration of an official state ideology in Russia in any guise,” he has also argued that the many objectives set before Russia could only be accomplished with unity and coherence of the Russian people:

> The fruitful and creative work, which our country needs so badly, is impossible in a divided and internally atomized society, a society where the main social groups and political forces do not share basic values and fundamental ideological orientations.\textsuperscript{134}

These ideological orientations, Putin asserted, can be found in Russia’s long past. The “foundation for the consolidation of society,” he maintains, “is what can be called the primordial, traditional values of the Russians.”\textsuperscript{135}

Through a persona which itself exudes “traditional” masculine prowess, coupled with political initiatives undertaken during his incumbency, Putin’s efforts to consolidate


\textsuperscript{134} Putin, quoted from Sakwa, \textit{Putin: Russia’s Choice}. 215.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
society and construct a new aura of Russianness have engendered a curious coalescence between corporeality and temporality that has positioned the male body as a prominent signifier of Russia’s inceptive national Idea. By drawing from (and in fact reifying) historical memories of both the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods, and by integrating these memories into a contemporary narrative of Russianness, Putin has created an illusion of temporal continuity, forging a link between nostalgic imaginings of the past and desires for a unified and stable future. Although this resurrection of the past has enabled Putin to reclaim patriotic ideas and practices that have historically been regarded as quintessentially Russian, these memories bear within them institutionalized connotations of masculinity which, when integrated into contemporary discourse, bestow upon the male body a form of disciplinary power that is more diffuse than that of pre-Soviet and Soviet Russia, but which nevertheless has served to redefine masculinity in accordance with what are regarded as authentic attributes of Russian identity. It positions the masculine Subject in opposition to undesirable Others within a new symbolic order of Russianness, while simultaneously inscribing this Subject into the narrative of the larger body politic.

This chapter examines the intersection of corporeality and temporality in Putin’s Russia, highlighting the ways in which Putin’s constructions of Russia’s post-Soviet national Idea, infused with symbolism and practices of the past and directed toward a future Ideal, have positioned the masculine Subject as a prominent signifier of Russianness, while simultaneously depending upon traditional representations of the male body for their existence. The first short section addresses the resurgence of patriotism in Putin’s Russia, explaining how Putin’s articulation of Russia’s lacking patriotic might has
a temporal and gendered dimension. Secondly, examples of Putin’s attempts at constructing a unified understanding of Russianness through temporal continuity are provided, first demonstrated by his discourse on Russia’s demographic crisis, then by the revival of patriotic symbolism and representations of the leader himself. Lastly, the level to which these constructions have been successful/institutionalized is assessed and challenges to Putin’s discourse, particularly as evidenced by opposition to Putin that has developed in late 2011 and the first few months of 2012, are considered.

Patriotism and Masculinity in Putin’s Russia

As one commentator wrote just before the official presidential election in March of 2000:

Before the future president of Russia, from the very beginning of his activity, will be the problem of choice: whether to stay in keeping with tradition, which defines the character of supreme power under Yeltsin, or to establish a new model that is more adequate to modern requirements. 136

Soon after Putin’s ascendance to power, it became clear that he would do both. Representing a stark contrast from the drunken inaptitude of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Putin acknowledged the failures of the Soviet Union and advocated the development of a Russian-style democracy. He declared that Russia’s tumultuous, revolutionary past had ended, and touted the benefits of increased cooperation with both the West and the rest of Eastern Europe. Yet in the same breath, Putin lamented the downfall of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th

Century” and advocated a remembrance of the USSR’s many historical accomplishments. He made no apologies for his professed Orthodox beliefs or for his background as head of the KGB, the Soviet Union’s secret security service—both of which have held a certain appeal for citizens of different persuasions. According to Richard Sakwa, “The attempt to link up with the past, to restore the torn fabric of society, to draw on intellectual traditions and cultural values of yesteryear, all reflect [a] post-traumatic pursuit of a usable past as the grounding of the present.” This linkage with the past not only grounds the present; it provides a link to the future, as well.

Defined only by a pervasive void that was revealed upon the downfall of the Soviet Union, the inceptive Russian nation-state was ripe for the advent of unifying sentiments that were capable of rallying the people and providing hope for the future. As Marlène Laruelle has noted, “at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the early Yeltsin years, the polls were unanimous in showing that Russians had a very negative view of themselves.” Surveys throughout the 1990s indicated that Russians were ashamed of their country; they viewed the era of Peter the Great as one of the brightest times in Russia’s history and held a formidable desire for the return of a strong and capable state. Emerging in the midst of this social and political discontent, Putin began

---


138 Sakwa, Putin: Russia’s Choice, 41-42.

139 Marlène Laruelle, In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 154.

140 Ibid., 154.
the process of crafting a new conceptualization of Russianness—one that invoked symbolism and practices that were perceived to have been lost, and which instilled a renewed sense of patriotic fervor.

Distinct from nationalism, which smacks of repressive Soviet ideology and conjures images of Western chauvinism, patriotism is understood much more broadly as representing an authentic love for one’s country and its historical accomplishments. In his December 1999 “Millennium Manifesto,” Putin made this difference clear:

Patriotism. This is a word that is often used in an ironic or even abusive way. However, for most Russians, it retains its original, positive meaning completely. It is a feeling of pride in one’s Fatherland, its history, and its accomplishments. It is an attempt to make our country more beautiful, richer, stronger, and happier. When these feelings are free of national conceit and imperial ambitions, there is nothing objectionable, it is inert. It is a source of courage, fortitude, and strength of the people. Having lost their patriotism and the associated pride and dignity, we lose ourselves as a people, capable of great deeds.¹⁴¹

In much of Putin’s post-Soviet discourse, patriotism has become a mandala of sorts—a mystical symbol that represents a search for unity and completeness, once again bestowing upon the individual a sense of dedication and duty to country. The generation of this patriotism has been dependent upon the careful selection and reification of memories from both the Imperial and Soviet periods, and the incorporation of these memories into contemporary discourse at the expense of all others. Under Putin’s rule, symbolism and practices of the Orthodox Church have been integrated into political maxims and national ceremonies, while the negative consequences of power that is shared by church and tsar are rarely recalled; imagery of Stalin and the Soviet Union’s WWII triumphs have been glorified in an array of public functions, while the atrocities

¹⁴¹ Putin 1999.
committed by the dictator himself have been downplayed; and although contemporary leaders have made great efforts to glorify authentic Russian culture à la Pushkin and Dostoyevsky, little mention is made of Russia’s great Silver Age literature, which allowed for substantially more liberal portrayals of diverse gender identities and sexualities.

As elucidated in the section that follows, Putin’s careful selection of historical symbolism, integrated into contemporary political discourse and combined with the glorification of his own Ideal body, contributed initially to the promise of a future that many Russians desired: one in which stability, strength, and cultural unity prevailed, and where Russia had regained an Idea that was uniquely its own. Within this discourse, the male body is positioned as a living representation of Russianness—a signifier capable of fulfilling Russia’s lack and securing a prosperous future. The health and procreative capabilities of the body are regarded as crucial for ensuring the future of Russia itself, in addition to restoring the patriarchic prowess that has historically characterized imaginings of the nation-state. Yet as will also be discussed, such positioning of the male body simultaneously generates manifestations of masculine Subjectivity that impact the lives and potentialities of Russian men in negative ways, requiring them to conform to a construction of “normality” that is anything but normal. And as evidenced by the anti-Putin sentiments that have been directed against the leader and his shows of machismo as of late, it is apparent that not everyone is buying the leader’s exploits. With Russia’s future hanging in the bounds, the confluence of masculinity and Russianness provides a barometer for the perpetual process of negotiation and turmoil that continue to characterize the contemporary Russian context.
Constructing the Body Politic

The initiatives that Putin has undertaken in pursuit of a unified conception of Russianness have positioned the male body as a signifier of Russia’s national Idea in two primary ways: First, as exemplified by Putin’s discourse on Russia’s demographic crisis, the male body has been subjected to a prohibitive and regulatory discourse in which it is scorned for its lack of physical fitness and for its failure to conform to a procreative, heterosexual Ideal. In this example, men are presented as undesirable Others who are responsible for society’s ills and who potentially threaten the future of Russia itself. Secondly, Putin’s revival of historical memory has created an illusion of temporal continuity and patriotic fervor that has enabled him to position his own body at the crux of tradition and modernity, giving rise to a masculine Subject that has a sense of agency and an ability to act. Embodied by a head of state who, in different guises, has at times been regarded as representative of the Russian nation-state, this Subject cultivates a set of expectations for individual men to emulate, in addition to bridging the greatness of Russia’s past with hope for its future: over the course of Putin’s ascension to power, the assertion of his own masculinity came to symbolize the rehabilitation of Russia itself.

In both examples, the power that is exacted upon the male body is both productive and prohibitive. It defines what the Ideal man should be and dictates the appropriate uses of his body, while simultaneously issuing prohibitions against behavior that is deemed to be destructive and non-Russian. Yet as Michel Foucault reminds us, such power, in its many guises, is “exercised rather than possessed.”\textsuperscript{142} It does not reside purely in the

hands of one leader, such as Vladimir Putin, but rather emerges through an amalgam of diverse institutional and historical knowledges. As Russia’s semi-authoritarian head of state, Putin’s discourse carries significant clout and has extensive reach into the Russian population. His control over media outlets has enabled his voice to be heard at the expense of opposing viewpoints. But Putin’s articulations are not purely his own; rather, they draw largely from a repository of Orthodox and Soviet patriotism, which converge to produce a centralizing and monoglossic understanding of what constitutes “normal,” or “natural” masculinity. Through Putin’s policies on the demographic crisis, coupled with his revival of patriotic fervor and his own celebrity-like status, the male body has become directly implicated in securing the future of the Russian people—while simultaneously becoming subjectified within this stifling and monologic discourse.

Russia’s Demographic Crisis—Ensuring the Future by Remembering the Past

On December 1, 2010, Putin appeared on Larry King Live, answering a host of questions that ranged from Russia’s involvement in Chechnya and Afghanistan to the possibility that Russia might host the 2018 World Cup. At the end of the interview, Larry King asked the prime minister about Russia’s stance on gays in the military. Putin avoided the question initially, choosing instead to elaborate on his response to King’s previous policy-related inquiry. When pressured again to address the question at hand, Putin raised an eyebrow, sighed deeply, and launched into a discussion about Russia’s demographic crisis and the importance of supporting mothers and families. “The situation is very acute with regard to demography,” Putin explained. “We’ve been undertaking very serious efforts to change the situation,” and have been largely successful. However,
“one gender marriages will not give you offspring. Therefore, we are very patient with sexual minorities,” but see great importance in supporting mothers and the birth of children. Asked again by King to answer the question of whether gays are able to serve openly in the Russian military, Putin answered tersely, “There are no prohibitions.”143

Putin’s attribution of homosexuality to Russia’s demographic crisis demonstrates poignantly one of the ways in which the male body has become a signifier of Russianness, giving rise to a masculine Subject that is literally subjected to a restrictive and future-oriented discourse. The downfall of Soviet control that began with perestroika and glasnost’ enabled the advent of gender identities and sexualities that had previously been effectively silenced, but which, since finding their voice, have frequently been blamed for Russia’s decline. “Non-traditional” (netraditsionnii) masculinities have become associated with Western decadence and self-seeking individualism, which have been said to at once contradict Russia’s past and threaten its future. As Brian Baer has convincingly argued:

The sudden appearance of homosexuality in the midst of Russian society incited denunciations of Western influence as well as Spenglerian interpretations of Russian history, in which homosexuality, imagined in terms of effeminacy and emasculation, appeared as a symptom—and a metaphor—of the decline of post-Soviet Russia in general and of the post-Soviet male in particular.144

With little else left of its past and no promises for the future, Russia’s greatness has become defined largely in terms of the characteristics and practices of its people. The idea that these people are steadily dwindling—their bodies diseased and infertile—

143 Part three of the interview, which includes this discussion, can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCUYkjt5PSE.

144 Baer, Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity, 2.
signifies the demise of the nation-state itself. Consequently, efforts to eliminate this symptom of Russia’s decline and restore a state of traditional “normality” have been central to Putin’s future-oriented political endeavors.

Between 1993 and 2010, the population of what is now the Russian Federation decreased from 148.6 million to 141.9 million. The declining male population in particular, which has been decreasing steadily since WWII, combined with the low life expectancy of men in the post-Soviet era has generated renewed concern about the condition of the male body (and consequently the strength of the nation-state they constitute). Although Putin has addressed the need to bolster Russia’s health care system, improve road conditions, and enhance Russia’s dilapidated pension system, he has simultaneously invoked patriotic imaginings of the past that specify particular uses of the male body and predicate the future of Russia on this body’s health and virility. Drawing from teachings of the increasingly popular Orthodox Church, Putin has sought to increase the birth rate through the restoration of traditional families—procreative, heterosexual unions that will produce at least two offspring and be compensated monetarily for doing so. Men must, as Putin maintains, return to more upstanding “moral” behavior and take initiative for their health and physical fitness—a state of being which the leader embodies personally. Finally, an influx of non-ethnically Russian immigrants, coupled with an exodus of ethnic Russians, has given rise to a portrayal of non-ethnic Russians as

---

effeminate and weak, while Russian men are presented as Ideal heroes of the nation. In each of these articulations, the male body is subjected to a diffuse form of disciplinary power that renders it both constitutive of and subject to desires for a strong and quintessentially Russian future.

Referring to the family as the “fundamental unit of society,” Putin explained in 2006 that “the problem of low fertility cannot be solved without changing the relationship of society towards the family and its values.” According to Putin, the family, consisting of a husband and wife united in matrimony, not only ensures procreation and therefore an increased birth rate, but also provides an appropriate environment for the upbringing (vospitanie) and education (obrazovanie) of the next generation. As such, the restoration of a traditional, “moral” family was declared to be a matter of national security and one of the “main tasks of the demographic policy of the Russian Federation until 2025.” Drawing from discourse of the Orthodox Church, Putin issued a decree (ukaz) in 2006, which had a stated goal of “strengthening of the family institution [and]

---

146 The feminization of ethnic minorities is a significant issue that extends beyond the discourse of Vladimir Putin, becoming particularly evident in the discourses of neo-nationalist groups and in certain elements of Russian popular culture.


the revival and preservation of spiritual and moral traditions of family relationships.”

He further welcomed the Orthodox Church into the discussion in 2007, stating bluntly that the revival of this family that he seeks would be impossible without the support and influence of Orthodoxy: “Today, we appreciate the desire of the Russian Orthodox Church to return to the life of Russian society the ideals and values that for centuries were, for us, our spiritual orientation…” “The state may establish and create favorable social conditions for families…but the revival of moral values of the family, without the Church, will not work.”

Supported by Putin, the Orthodox Church has spoken out forcefully about the importance of restoring a family—or in its terms, “malen’kaia tserkov,” (little church)—which, it claims, is based on the God-given teachings that constitute the essence of Russianness.

An event entitled the “Moscow Demographic Summit: Family and the Future of Humankind” was held in June of 2011 at the Russian State Social University in Moscow, with the intended purpose of bringing together those concerned about demographic decline in different parts of the world. Although portions of the summit focused on increasing living standards and health care as means of bolstering populations, many participants framed the issue negatively, in opposition to what they considered to be non-traditional familial arrangements. The welcoming remarks made by Patriarch Kirill, the conservative leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, exemplify this stance:

---

150 Ibid.


152 Ibid.
I greet with all my heart the participants of the Summit whose aim is to defend traditional family values and to analyze the world’s demographic problems…Organized by the World Congress of Families, this forum stands up for inviolability of human life, it speaks out against abortions, so-called same sex ‘marriages’, euthanasia, drug addiction and alcoholism.\textsuperscript{153}

The summit, which was welcomed and supported by the Russian State Duma, was more of a forum on the revival of traditional practices and the exclusion of so-called non-traditional gender identities than it was an effort to increase population counts by bettering people’s quality of life, health care, and other factors that directly limit its growth. It demonstrates effectively the politicization of the body in contemporary Russian society, under the auspices of reinstating the patriotic and traditional ideas that supposedly once made Russia great.

In addition to defining the family in unyielding Orthodox terms, the roles of men and women within this family, particularly regarding the upbringing of children, have been clearly delimited. As articulated by both Putin and the representatives of the church, the primary child-rearing responsibilities belong to women, while men’s involvement in the family is limited to their procreative and protective capabilities. Lamenting the low birth rate as a “fertility” issue, women are regarded as the main caretakers and nurturers of their families. The support of women’s health, as well as their financial status and ability to return to work after their child-rearing tasks are complete, have taken center stage in a number of Putin’s speeches. In a move that invokes a certain nostalgia for the Soviet “hero mother,” who was publically commended and showered with an array of social honors and privileges for giving birth to eight or more progeny, Putin has pledged to increase the payment made to women who produce multiple children. Yet

\textsuperscript{153} “Patriarch Kirill’s Blessing to the Summit” www.worldcongress.org.
conspicuously absent from this discourse is any mention of the responsibility of men to be involved and caring fathers, or the possibility that men, as well as women, could stay home and care for children. Instead, men are chastised for partaking in “immoral” practices such as smoking and drinking, and are encouraged to take care of their own health in order to better fulfill their more traditional (and religiously sanctioned) roles of procreator, breadwinner, and protector.

In light of a low male life expectancy, the health of men—and the care and regulation of their bodies—has been a primary concern in the post-Soviet period. As such, the male body has become directly implicated in Russia’s future, which is portrayed as literally dying out. According to Putin: “a serious problem is the death rate of people of working age, ninety percent of whom are men.”\textsuperscript{154} He continues:

> Obviously, key factors of mortality are living conditions and lifestyles…Experts believe that a significant proportion of deaths that could have been prevented are somehow related to alcohol abuse.\textsuperscript{155}

Undoubtedly, as life became increasingly unpredictable following the downfall of the Soviet regime, many men turned to excessive alcohol and drug use as ways of freeing themselves from an otherwise inescapable reality. On the other hand, the loss of male life is not new to Russia; according to some estimates, the Great Fatherland War (WWII) claimed the lives of more than 27 million people, most of whom were men. The demographic “crisis” has been developing for some time, but has only recently been used


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
by Putin to equate the health of men with the health of the state itself, rendering the problem a serious national concern and a powerful biopolitical issue.

While glorifying the male body for its potential strength and resilience, Putin and his allies have condemned the improper, immoral use of the body as non-Russian and linked to harmful Western influence. Even portrayals of the male body in art, television, and literature have been highly regulated under Putin’s watch, oftentimes under the guise of protecting Russia from potentially dangerous foreign ills. In 2007, the now-notorious photograph entitled *The Epoch of Clemency*, which portrays two Russian policemen kissing in a snowy birch grove, was removed by the government, along with sixteen other works of art, from the exhibit “Sots-Art: Political Art in Russia.”156 The exhibit was finally reopened in Paris, where it gained considerable notoriety. Then again in 2009, an art exhibit that was organized at the Sakharov museum by Tretyakov Gallery directors Andrei Erofeev and Yuri Samodurov drew criticism for bringing together works that were considered to be “pornographic, antireligious, or otherwise objectionable.”157 After a right-wing nationalist organization called the People’s Synod complained to the Moscow prosecutor’s office that the art “insulted the feelings of religious believers,” the case was sent to court. During the trial’s proceedings, an Orthodox priest began his testimony by referring to Erofeev as “a servant of Satan.”158 As incidents such as these demonstrate, the portrayal of non-masculine men, coupled with criticisms of Russia’s

156 Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*, 16. See Figure 1.


158 Ibid.
sacred Orthodox faith, are viewed widely as threatening the “authentic” foundations of the Russian culture—and its future. Such representations detract from the traditional image of the male body as a powerful machine and the father of both the individual family and the family of the larger Russian nation-state.

Putin’s revival of both Orthodox and Soviet practices have extended to the male body a form of disciplinary power that is diffuse, but which nonetheless serves to define what constitutes normal, or natural masculinity. His discourse that predicates the survival of Russia itself upon the adoption of traditional gender identities and familial practices, at once “establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination.”\textsuperscript{159} It subjectifies the body to a constraining discourse in which the boundaries of permissibility are not to be transgressed, while simultaneously issuing edicts on what constitutes appropriate behavior. By directing his policies toward the highly politicized objective of saving the Russian population and securing a prosperous future, Putin has subsumed individual bodies to the auspices of the state and oriented these bodies toward the pursuit of a patriotic endeavor in ways that haven’t been seen since Soviet times. It is once again the duty of citizens to provide for the collective, which means adhering to traditions and practices that are deemed to be historically and quintessentially Russian. The next section addresses the ways in which the revival of pre-Soviet and Soviet symbols, coupled with imagery of Putin as an Ideal man, has served to position the male body as a signifier of a potentially strong and prosperous Russia.

Putin and the Embodiment of a Russian Ideal

If we agree that the symbols of the preceding epochs, including the Soviet epoch, must not be used at all, we will have to admit then that our mothers’ and fathers’ lives were useless and meaningless, that their lives were lived in vain. Neither in my head nor in my heart can I agree with this.\(^\text{160}\)

Putin’s resurrection of historical symbolism and the positioning of himself as Russia’s Ideal man began in grand style with his official inauguration on May 7, 2000. As Boris Lanin describes it, “Putin strode energetically through Kremlin halls that were lined with dignitaries and soldiers dressed in new versions of tsarist-era uniforms.”\(^\text{161}\)

Filled with opulence and splendor, the inauguration was an event that could have been plucked directly out of Imperial Russia. Upon the gilded walls that encased the ceremony hung Russia’s coat of arms—the double-headed eagle that originated during the Byzantine Empire that had been modified and reestablished as a symbol of Russia. Patriarch Aleksii II, the supreme leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, stood prominently in the front row of the proceedings. After receiving the constitution and taking the official oath of office, Putin addressed the ceremonial attendees, stating:

> I consider it my sacred duty to unite the people of Russia and to gather citizens around clearly-defined tasks and aims, and to remember, every minute of every day, that we are one nation (Rodina) and we are one people. We have one common destiny.\(^\text{162}\)

---


Putin would spend the next eight years crafting this destiny, positioning himself as both its author and its dramatis.

As cultural critics Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have written, “Contemporaries can achieve greatness in their own time if they are represented and sensed as existing in a special sort of world beyond familiar contact.”\(^\text{163}\) By engendering a renewed sense of patriotism and evoking public nostalgia for a more stable time (even if this memory of stability is almost entirely constructed), Putin has created such a world and positioned himself within it as a commanding head of state who is capable of leading Russia to greatness. Through the restoration of national holidays, in which men from time immemorial are glorified for their service to the Fatherland, in addition to the revival of national symbols such from both the pre-Soviet and Soviet eras, which invoke nostalgia for a once powerful state and united people, Putin has brought together an amalgam of disparate events into a coherent symbolic order of Russianness in which representations of the male body—his own body—converge with mythologized temporal markers to produce a powerful manifestation of masculine Subjectivity that is mutually constitutive of a larger Russian body politic.

Russian history is no stranger to festive national holidays, replete with military parades, marching bands, and other assorted patriotic hoopla. Recognizing their potential for rallying citizens around a common sentiment, Putin has revived and redefined many pre-Soviet and Soviet holidays—holidays of empires that no longer exist, but which evoke powerful emotions in a populace that is unified by little else. In post-Soviet Russia, the majority of holidays that have been revived, newly created, or modified and reinstated

in some way tend to glorify the historical accomplishments of great men, particularly in
the armed forces. In keeping with Soviet tradition, professions that are deemed to be
those involved in protecting and defending the nation (Rodina) are afforded their own
day of commemoration. Police officers, cosmonauts, customs officers, and security
agents have their own special holiday, as do the different branches of the Russian army
and navy. In 2006, Putin enacted a presidential decree that resulted in the creation of
fourteen new holidays to commemorate Russia’s military alone. Days off are now given
for military lawyers, military police, migration services workers, the presidential guard,
tank workers, intelligence agents, and biological and chemical weapons defense
personnel.\footnote{Laruelle, In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary
Russia, 158.}

Many of these holidays are celebrated with grand pomp, while others are referred
to as dni voinskoi slavy Rossii (days of Russia’s military glory), and are not “days off”
holidays. Such holidays include celebrations of the victory of Alexander Nevski over the
Teutonic knights in 1242, as well as that of Dmitri Donskoii over the Tatars in 1380.\footnote{Ibid., 158.}
While bolstering the prestige of Russia’s military and providing it with an opportunity to
flex its patriotic might, some of these newly celebrated holidays, such as the
commemoration of Alexander Nevski’s victory, could be interpreted as potentially
having an anti-Western sentiment, as well.\footnote{This use of Alexander Nevski to invoke anti-Western sentiment is not new. Sergei
Eisensein’s monumental 1938 film “Aleksandr Nevski” was commissioned by Stalin for
the purpose of creating a patriotic weapon that would generate Soviet patriotism against
Nazi Germany at the onset of WWII. The film is infused with symbolism that vividly}
have also been infused with Orthodox rituals and practices, have not only served to engender a sense of patriotism and pride in Russia’s historical accomplishments; they have also served to reify historically gendered concepts of state and nation, while glorifying the strength and capability of the male body to protect and defend a fragile, yet enduring Motherland.

Two holidays that particularly glorify men and render them constitutive of Russia’s greatness include the annual May 9 celebration of Russia’s victory over Nazi Germany in WWII and the Defender of the Fatherland Day (Den’ Zashchitka Otechestvo). The May 9 celebration is widely regarded as one of Russia’s most important holidays—and one that invokes the most profound patriotic emotions: According to some estimates, Soviet Russia lost approximately 27 million citizens in WWII, most of whom were men. The final triumph of Soviet troops was viewed as tantamount to the salvation of the Soviet Union itself. Given this significance, the commemoration of this grand success is accompanied by celebrations marking the victories of Soviet troops in the 1943 Battle of Kursk and the Battle of Stalingrad, as well as a commemoration of the day in 1944 that the siege of Leningrad finally ended. During contemporary celebrations of such events, it is not uncommon to see veterans of the Soviet military fully turned out in their Soviet uniforms, their chests covered with medals that were awarded by Stalin and his generals. Rather than contrasting with more youthful Russian attendees, these veterans in many ways set the tone of the celebration—and provide the younger generations of military servicemen with a role model to emulate.

contrasts the greatness of Nevski’s army with the brutality of the Teutonic Knights (the Germans).
First celebrated on February 23, 1922 to commemorate the creation of the Red Army in 1918, Red Army Day became Soviet Army and Navy Day in 1949, then in 1995 it was renamed Defenders of the Fatherland Day by Boris Yeltsin, still intended to honor people who serve in the Russian Armed Forces. In 2006, Vladimir Putin changed the name to the singular Defender of the Fatherland, which was intended to dedicate the celebration not only to soldiers, but also “to every citizen who is responsive in one way or another to the national cause.”  

Defender of the Fatherland Day is frequently regarded as a complement to International Women’s Day—it is a day when wives and girlfriends buy small gifts in honor of the men in their lives, and when Russian servicemen receive national recognition for their contributions. By referring to the holiday in the singular, which also renders the term grammatically masculine, Putin extends this honor and associated obligations to all men, thereby reviving a sense of Soviet-era dedication that men were expected to exhibit toward their homeland.

Of course, the celebration of such holidays would be incomplete without prominent symbols of patriotism such as the Russian national flag, anthem, slogans, and coat of arms, all of which have been reconstructed from references to the past. The tricolor white, red, and blue Russian flag was first adopted in 1917 as a symbol of the provisional government, only to be readopted in the post-Soviet era. The armed forces also have their own flag, which was redesigned in 2003 to include the double-headed eagle of the Tsar, as well as the Soviet five-pointed stars proposed by Trotsky. The flag is red and contains the slogan “Motherland, Duty, Honor,” which was used by Tsarist

---

167 Ibid., 158.
armies in the 1500s. As Laruelle points out, such symbolism “combines the two previous regimes; the red flag represents the Soviet period while the double-headed eagle at its center symbolizes the imperial era.” Although music of the national anthem remains unchanged from Soviet times, the lyrics have been rewritten—by the same composer who penned the two previous versions, first under Stalin and again after Stalin’s death. Combined with revived symbolism of the Orthodox Church, these historical references to Soviet and Tsarist rule make a powerful statement at celebrations and political events, creating a sense of temporal continuity with empires long gone. They position Putin as an almost Tsar-like figure, demonstrating a greatness and power that could be Russia’s once again.

Amid this resurrection of national holidays and symbolic imagery, one symbol in particular makes such meaning possible to begin with and establishes a direct and mutually constitutive relationship between masculinity and Russianness. On November 4, 2006, which not coincidentally was National Unity Day (Den’ narodnogo edinstva), Putin declared that 2007 would be the “year of the Russian language” (god ruskogo iazika). His objectives were to cultivate a positive image of Russia in the near abroad, while returning to Russia the patriotic characteristics that have historically made its culture and history unique. And this emphasis on developing “true” or “authentic” Russianness through language has continued throughout his incumbency. Seated next to Patriarch Kirill at an organizational meeting for the Day of Slavic Writing and Culture, which was scheduled to take place on May 24—the name day of Patriarch Kirill—Putin

168 Ibid., 156.

169 Ibid.
stated that “Language, spiritual, cultural and historical heritage - is what defines a national identity that binds a people, society, and hence the whole country.” He continued, “The great educators Cyril and Methodius established, not only for the Slavic people, but for all of civilization, a truly priceless gift—the first Cyrillic alphabet.”

Let me stress again: this is necessary for all of us; essential for the establishment in society of true moral values and orientations, respect for our native country and her culture, respect for the memory of our ancestors.\textsuperscript{170}

The Russian language determines the parameters of expression and meaning, allowing for the articulation of particular “moral values and orientations” at the exclusion of others, while simultaneously serving as a powerful symbol of Russianness. It makes possible certain understandings of Russian culture, history, and politics that cannot be expressed by any other means, drawing a direct connection with the past and enabling such memory to persist into the future. Indeed, language enables both the nation and the roles and identities of its citizens to exist at all, giving rise to an “imagined community,” as Benedict Anderson once famously put it.\textsuperscript{171} Yet this power to produce meaning—to enable cultural understanding and self-actualization—simultaneously delineates the contours of impossibility. As a language that is inherently gendered and which derives from Old Church Slavonic, a well known weakness of Russian is its inability to articulate contemporary expressions of sex and gender through terminology other than profanity (\textit{mat}) or highly scientific, text book jargon. By advocating a return to “traditional” Russian, Putin is effectively re-gendering the Russian national landscape, while

\textsuperscript{170} All quotes in this paragraph taken from: http://premier.gov.ru/events/news/15277/.

\textsuperscript{171} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.}
simultaneously eliminating from Russian discourse the existence of gay masculinities, which rely largely upon mat and terminology imported from outside of Russia for their articulations.

Putin’s initiatives to restore the use of the Russian language were widely supported in light of what many people saw as an invasion of western obscenity. As Deputy Minister of Culture and Mass Communications Minister Andrei Gagarin noted during an interview with RIA Novosti in 2007:

In advertising there are many English borrowings—and people complain about it. Today there is a nasty trend: the cinema and television screen sometimes air profanity… the year of the Russian language is important for us because it is an occasion to once again appeal to the Russian culture, to its roots, because the language – is the image of the nation.172

This sentiment has been echoed forcefully by youth groups such as Nashi (Ours) and Idushchie Vmeste (Walking Together), who have lambasted contemporary Russian authors such as Vladimir Sorokin for supposedly perverting the Russian language and culture. Through traditional uses of Russian, the Ideal body is brought to life through discourse; but its construction depends upon a re-articulation of what has already been said—on the confining and patriarchic rigidity of the church—which is then oriented toward the production of a unified and coherent future.

Putin’s reinstatement of the Russian language demonstrates his efforts to reclaim ideas that are perceived to have been lost to history, or which have been infiltrated by destructive non-Russian influence. This re-appropriation of ideas that are uniquely Russian is also evident in Putin’s self-presentation, where the leader positions himself at

the intersection of tradition and modernity, assuming nearly every possible guise and situating these representations within a discourse that is unwaveringly Russian. As Cassiday and Johnson point out:

[T]he initially blank slate of Putin’s personality was inscribed in the course of his eight years in office with a highly sanitized version of Russian machismo: the President’s image lays claim to sexual, political, and physical prowess but repudiates vices traditionally associated with masculinity in Russian culture, including drunkenness, smoking, and inconsiderateness.173

In a manner that in many ways rehabilitates Russia’s recent and distant past, Putin has positioned himself as a living and breathing representative of a masculine Ideal—and by extension, a signifier of the strong and prosperous nation-state that Russia could potentially become.

Immediately upon assuming the office of the presidency, the young leader’s physicality and personal conduct represented a stark contradiction to the personal and professional deterioration of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, who had become famous for his public drunkenness, lack of stately demeanor, and frequent gaffes to the media. With his recurrent stumbling, slurred speech, and increasingly erratic behavior, Yeltsin, whose head of security once referred to him as a “suicidal alcoholic who was unfit to govern,” did little to inspire confidence in Russia’s future. The BBC echoed this sentiment in the late 1990s, concluding that “the body politic was in appalling health, headed by a man who had become an international embarrassment.”174 Putin, conversely, was composed


and articulate—never missing an opportunity to display his powerful yet measured masculine prowess, returning credibility to the ailing body politic, and forging a future that was uniquely Russian.

In a carefully choreographed mélange of activities and images, Putin has positioned himself as a prominent signifying link between Russia’s past and its future. His personal website boasts an extensive photo album in which the leader is captured in a variety of personae that are both historical and contemporary. Ranging from photos that portray Putin in an official capacity, to those that offer a more personal glimpse of the leader, Putin is situated prominently as a head of state who is everything that Russia is not. As the antithesis of both Yeltsin and the failings of the post-Soviet experiment with democracy, “[t]he President’s attributes in both visual and textual media typically include his sobriety, intelligence, competence, vigorous physical and psychological health and, above all, his manliness.” Putin is remarkably capable of assuming nearly every possible guise, which has enabled him to reclaim both memories of the past and events of the present as constitutive of the new Russia.

Asserting his measured, yet capable super-hero status, the leader has co-piloted fighter jets, commanded an aircraft carrier, and led a submarine research expedition to the floor of lake Baikal. Putin has also been photographed downhill skiing, whitewater rafting, and swimming the breaststroke in murky waters, in addition to tagging a Siberian tiger in the Far East, a polar bear in the Arctic, and also in the East, a Beluga whale

175 See the photo gallery at: http://premier.gov.ru/eng/

176 Cassiday and Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality,” 686.
named Dasha. In the fall of 2009, images emerged of the leader fly-fishing and horseback riding bare-chested in the Tyva Region of Siberia, sporting only green fatigues and trendy reflective sunglasses. During one of President Obama’s trips to Russia, Putin captured attention by taking to the streets with the Night Wolves—a Russian take on the Hell’s Angels—who proudly displayed the Russian flag along their journey. As photographs of the event circulated the Internet, the leader boasted that he had even performed a wheelie. Yet in light of these hyper-masculinized stunts, the former KGB officer and judo black belt has also been sure to demonstrate a softer side—praising the horse that carried him across the Siberian steppes, cuddling with puppies and other small animals, and feeding a baby elk from a bottle. This amalgam of imagery and events culminates in a representation that is, for many, Russia’s Ideal man. They position Putin within a discursive framework that pays homage to the past while simultaneously demonstrating the power that Russia could potentially regain.

Yet as with any discursive text, the reception and interpretation of constructed meaning is as important as the discourse itself. The Subject of an utterance, no matter how seemingly established, is still susceptible to the critical gaze of others. Putin’s ascendance to greatness would have been impossible outside of the context that he has had a strong hand in creating. Without the ceremonial pageantry of national holidays, symbolism of the pre-Soviet era, and a return to the language that for centuries has made

177 Some commentators have pointed out the ways in which Putin’s participation in animal research and conservation set the leader apart from the antics of his more distant predecessor Leonid Brezhnev, who was so inept at hunting during his later years that KGB officers would tranquilize animals and chain them to trees so that Brezhnev could shoot them successfully.

178 See Figures 2-6, which are also available on Putin’s website: [http://premier.gov.ru/eng/](http://premier.gov.ru/eng/)
an Idea of Russianness possible, Putin would have made little sense. And still, the multiple guises that Putin assumes are open to interpretation and scrutiny. How successful has this discourse been? Has the reinstatement of historical memory, coupled with imagery of Putin as the Ideal leader, truly inspired hope in the Russian people, or has it been perceived as merely a façade, masking Russia’s persistent disunity and distracting citizens from the real problems that the country faces? How have Putin’s antics impacted understandings of Russianness and masculine Subjectivity in this period of post-Soviet turmoil, and how have such constructions been carefully resisted?

**The Popularity of Putin: Fleeting Fad or the Epitome of Russianness?**

Viewed for over ten years as the most powerful politician in Russia, Vladimir Putin developed a cult of personality that rivals that of many movie stars. Although the sentiment is by no means universal, the support and adoration that have been bestowed upon Putin by radically different segments of the Russian population have been profound. Ranging from youth groups such as *Nashi* (Ours), who idolize Putin in ways that differ little from the ways in which the Young Pioneers looked up to Soviet leaders of the past, to radical Orthodox parishioners, such as “Mother Fotina,” who believes Putin to be a reincarnation of the Apostle Paul, Putin’s followers are devout and unwavering in their support. “The first strong national leader to emerge out of the chaos of the immediate post-Soviet period, he has inspired expressions of adulation the likes of which Russia has

---

not seen since the Stalin era.” Amid some of the highest approval ratings of any national leader, Putin has seen his likeness depicted in art, carved into busts, and even molded into giant pieces of chocolate. In the small town of Chelyabinsk, a “Putin bar” opened up, where one could buy “vertical power” kebobs and “when Vova was little” milkshakes. As Cassiday and Johnson point out, the song “A Man Like Putin,” which became an instant pop culture success, has also made it into “several thousand Chinese-manufactured stuffed bunnies, which were reportedly ‘selling like hotcakes’ in the Urals city of Yekaterinberg in early 2004.” Informal fan clubs have sprung up all over Russia, one of which has made the outlandish claim that St. Petersburg should be renamed “St. Putinsburg.” Even politics have not been immune to this Putin fanfare: In January 2011, the parliament of Kyrgyzstan voted to name a 4,500-meter mountain in the Tien Shan mountain range “Mount Vladimir Putin.”

This “Putin mania,” as it has been described, offers Russians, many of whom felt themselves deprived of both cultural and individual identity during the chaotic 1990s, the opportunity to articulate new modes of subjectivity that, although they seem to pay

---

180 Cassiday and Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality,” 681.


182 Cassiday and Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality,” 690.

183 See http://putinfans.narod.ru/

homage to a vanished past, also reflect contemporary social, political, and communicative reality.⁸⁵

Upon first assuming power in Russia, Putin embodied the stability, reliability, and strength that both Russia and Russian men were perceived to lack. His capable and measured persona, in addition to the successes that Russia has achieved under his tutelage, oftentimes eclipse and even justify the centralization of power and backsliding of democratic reform that have transpired during his incumbency. Pew and Levada polls from the late 1990s and extending into the 2000s have consistently indicated that people are most concerned about the strength of the state and the stability of their daily lives; democratic freedoms have consistently appeared at the bottom of the list. As articulated by Pew just prior to the 2008 presidential election: “while the world at large may be concerned about Putin’s increased centralization of power and rolling-back of democratic rights, there is little indication that Russians share these concerns.” The correspondent continues: “In fact, surveys consistently find that Russians have a definite preference for a strong leader over a democratic government, and large majorities say that a strong economy is more important than a good democracy to solve Russia’s problems.”⁸⁶

Desires for stability and strength, as well as a renewed sense of national identity, have undoubtedly helped to propel Vladimir Putin to stardom. Yet stability comes with a price. Putin’s policies and initiatives—even the projection of himself as a powerful and capable leader—have simultaneously engendered a particular Idea of Russia and strictly

⁸⁵ Cassiday and Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality,” 686.

defined gender identities that are not to be transgressed. Through his resurrection of traditional symbolism and practices, Putin has redefined Russia in ways that inspire nostalgia for a largely mythologized past, while prohibiting other possibilities. His critics, whether potential political rivals such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or outspoken opponents such as chess-star Gary Kasparov, have been effectively silenced. Journalists who contradict or criticize the leader tend to mysteriously disappear, while independent corporations that become too powerful are subsumed under the auspices of the state. And even though Putin routinely disparages attacks on ethnic minorities, such violence and discrimination have become commonplace in a country where “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality” have once again become the mantra of the day. Russia remains an unsafe place for gay men, in particular, who continue to be scapegoated for Russia’s post-Soviet decline: As recently as November 2011, a veritable “war against rainbows” has been launched in St. Petersburg and other provincial Russian cities, making it virtually impossible to rally in favor of gay rights, and signaling a likely crackdown on any public display of “non-traditional” sexual identity.  

Despite the exuberant popularity and adoration that has been bestowed on Vladimir Putin, it is also clear that the leader’s seemingly indefatigable power has not been left unchallenged. In August 2011, Putin was photographed emerging from a “deep sea” dive in which he had supposedly retrieved two pieces of ancient Greek pottery from the depths of the Black Sea. Standing in his wetsuit, Putin displayed the pottery proudly, posing for the cameras in a show of manliness and strength. The dive, however, was quickly revealed to be little more than a poorly orchestrated hoax: the pottery that Putin

---

“discovered” had been planted by his associates in water that was only about eight feet deep. Then in November 2011, the leader was booed publically during his appearance at a fighting match in Moscow—an event that was followed by a mysterious blackout of state-run television stations and an onslaught of contrived excuses and explanations. Combined with dissatisfaction over overtly fraudulent elections, these two incidents and others like them ignited public disdain for Putin that had been brewing in the blogosphere for years. Young professionals whose successes are largely attributable to the economic and political changes that transpired under Putin’s leadership have expressed frustration with the artificiality and corruption of Russian politics. They have turned out in droves to protest Russia’s undemocratic electoral process, and in opposition to Putin’s heavy-handed political antics.

As Putin embarks upon his quest for a third and extended term as Russia’s president, questions arise with regard to the future direction that the country and the leader’s popularity will take. As president, then prime minister, Putin enjoyed remarkable popularity. He played a significant role in restoring a traditional sense of machismo to the Russian national landscape, and in doing so, defined the contours of acceptability for masculine conduct. Out of the chaos of the post-Soviet period, he crafted an Idea of what it means to be Russian based on nostalgic historical memory from Russia’s long past, while positioning the male body as a prominent signifier within this new symbolic order of Russianness. Consequently, two prominent, yet interconnected manifestations of masculine Subjectivity have emerged: a stable and fortified Subject that is capable of leading Russia gallantly into the future; and a Subject that is denounced for its weakness and its inability to act. In both cases, a diffuse form institutional and historical power has
been exacted over the male body, which has become directly implicated in Russia’s post-
Soviet quest for self-identity.

It is difficult to not be amused and even slightly enamored by the hoopla and
pageantry that have enveloped Russia’s social and political scene during Vladimir Putin’s
incumbency. To be certain, the leader can be charming and witty, and always entertains.
Yet the big picture reminds us that Russia’s future is a potentially slippery slope—not
because Russia is somehow returning to the autocratic days of yore, but because the
practices and symbolism that have been revived under Putin’s watch generate so much
public enthusiasm that the consequences are not always fully considered. As both the
nation-state and individual gender identities become inscribed with Ideals from a
mythologized past, the lives of living, breathing people are consistently in jeopardy. Care
must be taken to not only preserve Russia’s unique cultural heritage, but to also protect
the nation-state from the development of a restrictive and hegemonic discourse that
cannot be transgressed. As Putin begins his third term for the presidency, the fate of the
nation—and the men who are charged with making its greatness possible—are critically
at stake.
Figure 1: “The Epoch of Clemency” by The Blue Noses

Figure 2: Putin on his shirtless equestrian journey across the Siberian steppes.
Figure 3: Putin fishing in the Enisei River in the Republic of Tyva, Siberia

Figure 4: During one of Barak Obama’s trips to Russia, Putin stole the show by riding with the Night Wolves—Russia’s incarnation of the Hell’s Angels—and later boasted of performing a wheelie.
Figure 5: Putin hugging a Bulgarian shepherd dog—a gift from Bulgaria’s Prime Minister Boiko Borisov

Figure 6: Putin feeding a baby elk at the national park “Losiny Ostrov” (Elk Island) on June 5, 2010
CHAPTER THREE

IN THE SERVICE OF FAITH—ORTHODOXY AND MASCULINITY IN RUSSIA’S ARMED FORCES

The spiritual revival of the Russian Fatherland is unthinkable without the revival of the faith of our fathers and grandfathers—Russian Orthodoxy. Under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian society will not only again overcome economic, political and moral crises, it will be resurrected to new life. We believe and know that it will be so. Revival of the Church will bring the revival of Russia.\(^{188}\)

In February 2008, more than 250 boys aged eight to seventeen gathered in the Vladimir region of Russia to participate in the fifth Interregional Suvorov Military-Patriotic Club competition. Comprising twenty-two teams, the boys competed in obstacle courses designed by war veterans of Afghanistan and Chechnya. They navigated their way through snowy terrain—crawling under a cord stretched inches above the ground, running through icy streams, and climbing up ladders made of birch—all while dodging play grenades and evading “enemy” capture. The participants who made it to the end of the obstacle course were “met with a Suvorov ‘Hurrah!’ brotherly hugs, and hot tea.”\(^{189}\)

In addition to the obstacle course, the competition included a military history quiz, as well as rope tying, weight lifting, push-ups, chin-ups, and a “pneumatic rifle competition,” where the boys demonstrated their skill at assembling and disassembling

\(^{188}\) *Rezolutsiia tematicheskoi gruppi ‘Puti i tseli duchovnovo vozrozhdeniia Rossii’* (Moscow, 1993).

Kalashnikov machine guns. The stated objectives of the competition: “to attract the government’s and society’s attention to the challenge of raising a young generation on the foundation of traditional Russian values,” and “to help these youngsters become real men, patriots, and citizens of their country.”

At first glance, the organization of this type of competition seems relatively unsurprising. Such patriotic events are not uncommon in contemporary Russia, particularly as the military endeavors to bolster its capabilities and prestige after years of debilitating decline. What lends uniqueness to this event and others like it is that they are organized not by the Russian Government or the Russian Armed Forces directly, but rather by organizations that are affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the military department of the Moscow Patriarchate and Vladimir Diocese, Orthodox Russia, and the Center for the National Glory of Russia. Aleksandr Suvorov, for whom the competition was named, is regarded as one of the greatest generals in Russian history, battling successfully against the Prussians during the Seven Year’s War (1756-1763) and the Turks in the Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774), in addition to serving in Poland, Italy, and on many other fronts. He is said to have exhibited heroic leadership capabilities, conducting himself with pious humility while defending the Fatherland with ruthless determination. The glorification of Suvorov in Orthodox discourse and in military competitions such as these exemplifies the church’s effort to assert the centrality of Orthodox Christianity to Russia’s post-Soviet Idea, while simultaneously redefining the Ideal Russian man as both an embodiment and defender of Russianness.

Ibid.
Against the backdrop of a moribund Soviet Empire, the Russian Orthodox Church began to assert its prominence as early as the mid-1980s. Welcomed by Mikhail Gorbachev as a potential ally in his attempts to modernize and revive the fledgling Soviet Union, the church found in the chaos of the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods an opportunity to regain its stature and prestige. As this “perestroika of faith”\(^{191}\) began to develop after years of atheistic communism, the church essentially picked up where it left off in 1917: The Cathedral of Christ our Savior, which had originally been destroyed by Stalin in 1931 and later turned into the world’s largest open-air swimming pool by Nikita Khrushchev, was rebuilt under the direction of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov in 2000 as an exact replica of the original; land that had been seized by Soviet authorities was recovered \textit{en masse}; and the icons that had provided access to the spiritual realm before they were confiscated and destroyed by the Bolsheviks returned to both churches and private homes across the Russian landscape.\(^{192}\) And the church’s increased prominence in society has been profound: An astounding 80 percent of the Russian population self-identifies as Orthodox, although the majority of these believers attend mass infrequently and seldom participate in church rituals.\(^{193}\) Orthodoxy has returned as a powerful symbol of Russianness, connecting people with a time that in their minds was characterized by stability and grandeur, rather than unpredictability and turmoil.

\(^{191}\) Garrard and Garrard, \textit{Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent}, 1.

\(^{192}\) The construction of the Cathedral of Christ our Savior began in the early 1990s and took until 2000 to complete.

Although the role of the Orthodox Church in Russian society and its relationship with the state have changed many times throughout Russia’s long past, Orthodoxy has repeatedly been mythologized as constituting, on a foundational level, the essence of what it means to be Russian. As prominent Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev wrote in his book The Russian Idea, “The mission of Russia was to be the vehicle of true Christianity, that is, of Orthodoxy, and the shrine in which it is treasured… ‘Orthodoxy’ is a definition of ‘the Russians’. “\textsuperscript{194} A central precept of the Russian Idea is the notion that Russia has a special standing in the world because of its Orthodox faith, which is “fundamentally different from the West and incompatible with Western political culture, historical development and religious conceptions.”\textsuperscript{195} It has even been said that Russia is destined to become the Third Rome, succeeding both the Roman and Byzantine Empires. As Zoe Knox points out, a “key conviction of the Russian Idea is that the country’s traditions provide a blueprint for its future, centered on the Orthodox faith, with its collectivism and spirituality, epitomized by the concept of sobornost’. “\textsuperscript{196} And indeed, Orthodoxy has come to play a decisively important role in constructions of Russia’s future, becoming a foundational, defining element of what it means to be Russian in the post-Soviet context. According to the church, Orthodoxy not merely serves as a spiritual guide for the Russian people—it is what makes possible their existence to begin with.

\textsuperscript{194} Berdyaev, The Russian Idea, 9.

\textsuperscript{195} Knox, Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism, 138.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 138.
Discursively, the church has become a *point de capiton* of post-Soviet society—uniting otherwise disparate signifiers within a unified network of meaning and defining Russia’s national Idea in Orthodox terms. Emerging out of the social and symbolic lack that was revealed upon the Soviet Union’s disintegration, the Orthodox Church has asserted its centrality to Russian history and culture, and has established itself as not merely one signifier of the Russian Idea out of many, but as a master signifier and the nation’s principal, constitutive feature. It has presented a teleological depiction of history in which Russia was founded upon principles of Byzantine Christianity in 988, and in which Orthodoxy, despite the suppression of religion during the Soviet period, has continued to endure as a quintessential element of Russianness. According to the church, Orthodoxy is ingrained in the Russian *dusha*, or soul; to be Russian means to be Orthodox, and to deny the centrality of Orthodoxy to Russian identity is to deny the essence of this identity itself. Consequently, the state-mandated suppression of the church during the Soviet period is oftentimes presented as constituting a rupture in Russia’s historical mission as the authentic purveyor of the faith, thereby effectively severing Russians from their roots. This suppression of Orthodoxy has, according to the church, given rise to a host of physical and existential maladies that are said to threaten the future of the Russia itself.

Physically, Russia’s future is said to be jeopardized by crime, disease, and a rapidly declining population—all of which are oftentimes attributed to a lack of morality and improper uses of the body. As lamented in 2000:

> The Russian Orthodox Church has to state with deep concern that the peoples she has traditionally nourished are in the state of demographical crisis today… Life is threatened by epidemics, growing cardiovascular,
mental, venereal and other diseases, as well as drug-addition and alcoholism…

Although it is true that Russia’s population has been declining rather steadily in the post-Soviet period, the church fails to note that this decline actually has as a catalyst the Second World War and Stalinist purges. Rather than attributing such maladies to the economic and political decline that accompanied life after communism, the church has argued that these issues are due largely to a “darkened state of the human heart” and to a departure from the spiritual and moral practices of Orthodoxy. According to the late Patriarch Aleksii, “the main reasons for the deep crisis of society and government lie in a ‘spiritual vacuum of society, which is filled with harmful influence, and is driving Russia into the abyss of hatred and violence’.” Even as fires raged across Russia during the summer of 2010, Aleksii’s successor, Patriarch Kirill, confirmed that “the cause of all the earthly misfortunes is people’s sins,” and urged Russians to repent and pray for an end to the devastation.

The church and its many supporters oftentimes argue that humanity has lost its way; that traditional Orthodox teachings and practices have been abandoned in favor of individualistic self-interest and physical lasciviousness. Such un-Orthodox behavior, as

---


198 Ibid.


evidenced particularly by the decline of the traditional family and the increased visibility of “non-traditional” sexualities and gender identities, is oftentimes depicted as a Western import—as directly opposed to the God-given characteristics that constitute the essence of Russianness. A 2006 article in the Siberian Orthodox Gazette demonstrates this attitude poignantly by attributing issues such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, the demographic crisis, and even matters of national security to the “mortal sin of homosexuality,”201 while simultaneously pointing to the necessity of maintaining Russia’s (Orthodox) distinction from Western societies, in which this “distortion has become the norm.”202 As the church endeavors to construct Russia’s national Idea in Orthodox terms, both the physical and spiritual survival of Russia have been predicated upon a return to Orthodox traditions and practices—particularly as they pertain to control over one’s body, its functions, and behaviors. According to the church, it is only through a revival of Orthodox spiritual-morality (dukhovno-nravstvennost’) that power can be restored to the once-mighty Fatherland and the salvation of Russia ensured.

By mythologizing spiritual and moral principles of the Orthodox Church as timeless and ethereal, as representing a sort of innocence that existed prior to the evil of the Soviet Union, the church and its proponents posit the “return” of spiritual-morality to society as central to both ameliorating problems of the contemporary period and securing Russia’s future identity and salvation—as key to re-creating a future Ideal based on recontextualized teachings and practices of the past. As I. F. Goncharov argued in a 2005

---


202 Ibid.
publication of Obrazovanie i Pravoslavie, “The complete disappearance of spirituality means the disappearance of a tribe, ethnicity, nation. We are on the verge of extinction because spirituality has left the lives of the majority of the Russian people.” Patriarch Aleksii echoed this claim in a 2008 interview with President Dmitrii Medvedev, when he affirmed that “the very welfare of the people is defined not as much in terms of their material possessions as by their spiritual and moral state.” Consequently, if “sinful” behavior such as non-traditional familial arrangements, homosexuality, pornography, and other “non-natural” uses of the body are responsible for the nation’s physical and existential demise, the only hope for the future is to break from the Godless past of the Soviet Union and reestablish in society the moral behavior that is defined in accordance teachings of the church. Such sentiments have found an audience in Russian politicians, who as recently as fall of 2011 initiated a so-called “war against rainbows,” effectively banning “propaganda of homosexuality” in the cities of Ryazan, Arkhangelsk, and St. Petersburg. Meanwhile, thousands of Russians flocked to the Cathedral of Christ Our

203 I F Goncharov, Bez Boga: i v shkole ne do poroga (2005), http://www.orthedu.ru/pedagog/goncharov.htm. Obrazovanie i Pravoslavie (Education and Orthodoxy) is an online publication promoting the reintegration of Orthodox Christianity in the classroom.


Savior in Moscow to catch a glimpse of what was believed to be the Virgin Mary’s belt.206

This desire to break from the Soviet past and revive the Orthodox teachings and practices that will supposedly transform society and lead Russia into a glorious future has generated an intense push for Orthodox education among children and young adults. With little recollection of Soviet ideology, this generation has been receptive to both the consumerism of the West and the glorious “origin myths” that represent for them not a failed empire, but the persistence of a unique sense of what it means to be Russian. Consequently, the post-Soviet generation has provided one of the best opportunities for the church to reclaim its central position in the Russian Idea and to instill a sense of spiritual-morality, which, it claims, will guide these young people into adulthood and ultimately change Russian society. Many of these educational endeavors have been pursued through the inclusion of Orthodoxy in the Russian school system, which has recently begun to require courses on religious history and Orthodox Christianity. After a long fought battle that generated considerable debate over the separation of church and state, a course entitled “The Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture,” which was proposed in 2006, finally made its way into the classroom in 2010. Within this discourse, young people are taught the value of the “traditional” family, and are warned against the evils of abortion, homosexuality, and promiscuity. They are taught that Orthodoxy is the foundation and primary constitutive feature of Russian identity, and that without this faith, the Russian people would cease to exist.

Yet interestingly, this focus on Orthodox education has not been limited to the “civilian” classroom—it has also taken center stage in Russia’s armed forces, where control over the male body and the regulation of both individual and collective behavior were already paramount. Military camps and patriotic competitions such as the previously discussed Suvorov event have sprung up all over Russia, drawing large crowds of impressionable young boys. Orthodox education has also begun to feature prominently within branches of the Russian military itself, which is charged with protecting Russia and ensuring its survival, while simultaneously symbolizing the nation-state’s strength and masculine prowess. After years of dilapidation and decline, the Russian armed forces lost much of the prestige that they once enjoyed. Conditions have been notoriously abominable, leading politicians and religious leaders alike to take up the cause of fortifying Russia’s military apparatus. The inclusion of Orthodox chaplains on army bases and the development of Orthodox educational programs within military academies have been in many ways justified by the necessity of restoring honor to Russia’s military and eradicating some of the abusive behavior that is known to take place among the ranks. Infused with Orthodox teachings, the practices in which conscripts are required to partake now involve not only training in defense and reconnaissance techniques; they now also include patriotic educational sessions in which soldiers are taught the foundations of Russia’s Orthodox history, its centrality to contemporary culture, and the “normal,” or “natural” practices that they are expected to embody and defend.

This influx of Orthodoxy into military discourse has given rise to a new symbolic order of Russianness in which the infinite—eternal life and the salvation of the nation-
state—is pursued through the finite—the finalization of masculine Subjectivity. Within this discourse, it becomes men’s essential duty (dolg) to both embody and defend the timeless spiritual and moral teachings that are said to be at the heart of Russian identity, while demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice their lives for a utopia that is yet to be realized. They must attain mastery over the self, subjecting themselves not only to the disciplinary techniques of the military, but now also to moral precepts of the church, which require conjugal fidelity, procreative sexuality, and a dedication to family above all else. Endeavoring to control their base instincts and aspire to a higher level of being, men are required to transform their bodies into instruments of the divine and exhibit spiritual and moral behavior that is said to lie at the heart of all “mankind.” According to Metropolitan Filaret, “the moral law must be acknowledged as innate to mankind, that is, fixed in the very nature of man…indisputable.” In every human conscience is “the basis of universal morality.” Although the church recognizes the existence of sinful temptation, it contends that through spiritual work and prayer—through the exercise of free will—men can master their unholy vices and attain eternal life.

Military discourse is predominantly geared toward defining men’s conduct, aptitudes, and capacities, and regulating their behavior through daily routines, exercises, and training activities in order to “put them in the place where they will be most


208 Ibid.
useful.” When infused with teachings of the church, this discourse has as its object what Michel Foucault referred to as the “natural body”—a body that is disciplined “not simply in the pursuit of some mechanized ideal, but, rather, in the pursuit of natural and organic life at the expense of a rational mechanics.” In this sense, the disciplinary power of the church-military complex is “individualizing,” in that it requires of the individual self-mastery pursued through control over physical desires; but it is also “massifying,” in that this body, which is made to be “natural” as defined in accordance with Orthodox teachings, becomes dedicated fully to a larger social cause. This discourse deploys a form of power that is directed not only toward “man-as-body,” but also toward “man-as-species,” where problems such as Russia’s declining birth rate, the increased mortality rate, and the overall health of the population become the domain of the natural body, which is made to be natural at the expense of all other alternatives. Subjected to these teachings and practices, the masculine Subject becomes fixed within a constraining disciplinary discourse in which men’s bodies, now dedicated to a larger existential cause, are no longer their own. Rather, they are reified in accordance with constraining

---


210 Foucault, Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 155.


discourses of spiritual-morality in which any divergence from what is deemed “normal,” or “natural,” is not only un-Orthodox, it is also fundamentally non-Russian.

As defenders of the Fatherland and an “authentic” Russian way of life, men must be willing to sacrifice their bodies for the greater good. Through this willingness to die for their country, men become enmeshed in a purpose that is literally larger than life. They are subjected to a form of disciplinary power which functions, in Slavoj Žižek’s terms, as a “stand-in for the radical negativity of Death—the absolute Master,” finding meaning in the possibility of death that exceeds that of life itself. Abiding by the strict moral discipline of church-military discourse, “the renunciation of bodily pleasure becomes a pleasure of its own,” as the Subject is promised an escape from death through the attainment of eternal life. In the words of Foucault, the mastery of the self that Subjects must pursue bears the potential of generating a “radical detachment vis-à-vis the world,” which may strain toward “a purification that will ensure salvation after death and blissful immortality.” Yet at the same time, this disciplinary discourse binds the Subject to characteristics that are deemed to be eternal and unchanging, rather than variable and subject to redefinition. The resurrection of national military heroes, coupled with an effort to revive time-honored teachings and practices, gives rise to a new symbolic order of Russianness in which the Subject is “pinned down” by the point de capiton Orthodoxy, whose teachings and practices are said to be timeless and unending.


214 Ibid., 106.

The outcome is a definition of masculine Subjectivity in which the desires and practices of the body are rendered subservient to the pursuit of eternal life, and where an almost monastic heterosexual masculinity is privileged over all other possibilities.

The following section addresses the ways in which teachings and practices of the Orthodox Church have become integrated into the Russian Armed Forces, and assesses the consequences of this process for constructions of both masculine Subjectivity and Russianness. The first part focuses on the church’s efforts to reestablish its own flavor of patriotism in the Russian military—the construction of a new symbolic order in which the Subject is positioned—through the introduction of Orthodox education at military academies and ministry in the ranks. This discourse establishes Orthodoxy as central to Russian identity, elucidates historical relationships that existed between the church and the armed forces, and declares it to be the calling of all soldiers to defend these traditions and keep them alive. Secondly, the construction of a “natural” masculine Subjectivity is examined, primarily through an analysis of discourse that details the purpose of Orthodox education, through which soldiers are molded into Ideal versions of heroes of the past, adhering to traditional family practices and curbing sinful temptation. Finally, the broader social institutionalization of Orthodox discourse in Russian politics and culture is considered and the consequences of the church’s popularity and military involvement are discussed.

**Orthodox Education in the Russian Military**

Upon the downfall of the Soviet regime, the Russian military was in an abysmal state. Armed with outdated weaponry and equipment, the armed forces were also dogged by low morale and poor living conditions. Compensation was pitiful, as the benefits and
prestige once awarded to military personnel had all but withered away. Deadly hazing techniques known as *dedovshchina*, where young conscripts are made to perform degrading acts for senior personnel, or “grandfathers,” proliferated throughout the ranks. Senior commanders did little to stop this institutionalized violence, which has claimed the lives of many young recruits—either as a result of severe beatings or suicide.216 In addition to these internal problems, the military had lost its clout as a symbol of Russian might. The Soviet war with Afghanistan was viewed as a catastrophic failure, and the ongoing battles in Chechnya, which were draining the country of resources and getting young men killed at a deplorable rate, did little to restore confidence in the Russian military. According to data released by General Pavel Grachev in the early 1990s, more than 60 percent of all young men conscripted into the army had failed to report to their units.217 In response the violence that dissuaded many conscripts from showing up, groups such as the Committee of Soldier’s Mothers (*Komitet Soldatskikh Materei Rossi*)218 have voiced strong opposition to the current state of Russia’s armed forces, pressuring political leaders to eliminate hazing practices and ensure that soldiers are properly equipped.

216 Many of these “suicides” were actually deaths that resulted from hazing. For an extensive report on violence in Russia’s military, see “The Wrongs of Passage,” Human Rights Watch (October 19, 2004), http://www.hrhw.org/en/reports/2004/10/19/wrongs-passage (accessed July 25, 2011).

217 From Garrard and Garrard, Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent, 219. Grachev also explained in 1993 that 34,000 conscripts had a criminal record, which had led to a 25 percent increase in the number of serious crimes. See Flemming S Hansen, “The Moscow Patriarchate and the Right to Conscientious Objection,” Religion, State & Society 37, no. 4 (2009): 403-417.

Amid these deplorable conditions—which have in many ways represented the deterioration and vulnerability of Russia itself—the Orthodox Church has asserted itself as an entity capable of restoring patriotism and moral behavior to Russia’s military.

According to Patriarch Aleksii:

[C]ooperation between the church and the army will bear fruit in the affairs of strengthening the spirit of soldiers, instilling in them a sense of patriotism, loyalty to country and military duty, in strengthening friendship, discipline, and order.\(^{219}\)

The website *Nравственность’ в Образовании* (Morality in Education) echoes this claim, stating:

All the centuries-old history of Russia and its armed defense proves the indisputable fact that without a high spiritual, moral mobilization, respect for its history and traditions, that is, without a unifying idea, there cannot be a strong army capable of defending the Fatherland and the interests of its people.\(^ {220}\)

In turn, Orthodox presence in the military would simultaneously enhance the stature of the church by associating it with an institution that is generally known for generating sentiments of patriotism and devotion to the Fatherland. Following Patriarch Aleksii’s assurance that he would not “push for Orthodoxy to be a state church and would not interfere in modern logistics and tactics,”\(^ {221}\) a cooperation agreement emerged between


\(^{221}\) Garrard and Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*, 217.
the church and military in 1994 that gave the Orthodox Church a prominent place within the Russian armed forces.

At a meeting between the patriarch and General Grachev, a “five-point plan” was signed that enabled the development of a Coordinating Committee for Interaction between the Russian Armed Forces and the Russian Orthodox Church, through which a long term program of interaction was developed with regard to matters of “scientific, cultural, religious and ethical fields” as well as “research into the religious situation” of the armed forces, with the eventual aim of organizing “interaction in regeneration of Russian spirituality and tradition of faithful service to the Fatherland.” At the signing ceremony, Grachev explained:

[T]he army is in need of spiritual education…unfortunately, neither the school nor the institutions of secondary and higher education provide the upbringing required for the development of people who are patriotic towards their Fatherland.

Consequently, in 1995, the first Orthodox chapel that was built inside a military institution was blessed by Patriarch Aleksii. Two years later, another chapel was erected by the entrance to the Ministry of Defense—and also dedicated ceremoniously by the patriarch. Orthodox priests began to bless military equipment and installations, in addition to issuing awards to military officials. It was not long before Orthodox teachings found their way into military classrooms and barracks, where young men would be taught the foundations of Russian culture and history, in addition to learning how the fortification of their own bodies and their ability to control physical desires would not

---

222 Ibid. 217.

only lead to eternal life for themselves, but would enable them to provide this future for
the Fatherland, as well.

Of course, this association between the Orthodox Church and the Russian military
has as a historical precedent the Soviet Union, when Joseph Stalin revived religion as a
tactic for rallying the troops to fight against the Nazis. In the post-Soviet period, the
introduction of Orthodox education into the Russian military was facilitated in large part
by the Patriarchate’s 1995 establishment of the Department for Relations with the Armed
Forces and Law-Enforcement Agencies (Sinodal’ny otdel Moskovskogo Patriarkhata po
tzaimodeistviyu s vooruzhennymi silami i pravokhrani- tel’nymi uchrezhdenyami).
Headed by Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov, this department has orchestrated a host of
military camps and educational seminars, in addition to coordinating relations between
various branches of the armed forces and the Orthodox Church. Its website boasts a
wealth of information on the church’s educational endeavors, in addition to making
available video clips and a photo journal that document the church’s undertakings.²²⁴
Citing a documentary that was produced in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the
department’s founding, Flemming Hansen points out the ways in which this foray into
educational undertakings has also served to elevate the standing of the church. The
documentary, he notes, “shows images of troops parading and firing guns at Chechen
rebels and of priests parachuting and breaking pieces of plywood with their bare
hands.”²²⁵ This mutually advantageous relationship between the church and the military

²²⁴ The main website where this department’s news and documents are posted is
www.pobeda.ru.
²²⁵ Ibid., 410.
grew quickly, culminating in the official support of President Dmitri Medvedev, which the president announced at a July 21, 2010 meeting with governmental officials and religious authorities.

At this July meeting, Medvedev declared:

I have decided to support these two initiatives: to teach the foundations of religious culture and secular ethics in Russian schools; and to organize on a permanent basis the work of priests in the armed forces, which I consider [to be] timely.\textsuperscript{226}

The plan, according to Medvedev, would be to phase in Orthodoxy gradually: by the end of the year, chaplains would be appointed to military units abroad, particularly in Armenia and Tajikistan, as well as in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Kyrgyzstan, and Sevastopol; this infusion of chaplainry would then continue throughout the armed forces within Russia; finally, a directorate would be established in the central administration of the military, its districts, and fleets.\textsuperscript{227} The guide for determining which unit would be sent a chaplain was the proportion of Orthodox servicemen relative to those of other faiths. According to Medvedev, “If servicemen who belong to a particular religion make up over ten percent of the entire personnel of a brigade, a division, or higher educational establishment, a priest may be attached to them.”\textsuperscript{228} The entire process would be complete by the end of 2010.


\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{228} Quoted in Ibid.
With the blessing of the state, the church’s role in military life became official.\textsuperscript{229} Led now by Patriarch Kirill, the church began its campaign to restore patriotism to the Russian armed forces—to create a new symbolic order of Russianness that would change the context in which young men were positioned, calling for new behavior and a new orientation towards their reason for military service. In a 2011 speech at the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Patriarch Kirill asked: “Why do they [soldiers] shed their blood?” “For what must a man be ready to give his life?” “For what did our ancestors defend the country, for what did they die?”\textsuperscript{230} Kirill continues his speech by suggesting that soldiers in the Imperial Army were willing to sacrifice their lives first and foremost for their beliefs. “First,” according to the Patriarch, “people protect their beliefs, their faith…” People during the time of the tsars “defined themselves as Russian, precisely because they associated themselves with a particular faith.”\textsuperscript{231} Claiming that nothing has changed, Kirill describes how soldiers’ desires to “not lose their spiritual, cultural, and political sovereignty” remain strong.\textsuperscript{232} Soldiers must not only practice Orthodoxy in their daily lives, they must also be defenders of the faith—a

\textsuperscript{229} It should be noted that then-President Vladimir Putin introduced the course ‘Foundations of Military Service’ (Osnovy voyennoi sluzhby) into the public educational system in 2000. The course was “aimed to give schoolchildren a basic knowledge of military matters, including the use of weapons, as well as a ‘military-patriotic upbringing’” See Hansen, “The Moscow Patriarchate and the Right to Conscientious Objection,” 412.


\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
faith that constitutes the Russian nation-state itself, and which will enable it to either persevere into the future or whither away in favor of non-traditional (non-Russian) practices. “You should not be ashamed of going to church and teaching the Orthodox faith to your children,” Kirill proclaimed, “Then we shall have something to defend with our missiles.”233

This sentiment was echoed at the military section of the XVII International Christmas Educational Readings, when Major-General Alexander Cherkasov, a professor at the Military University, opened his presentation by describing the ways in which he came to realize that Orthodoxy lies at the very heart of Russianness, and that it is the duty of soldiers to protect this indisputable truth. “For every man,” Cherkasov stated, “there are moments when he suddenly stops and ponders the meaning of his own life, the meaning of all that he does.”234 Cherkasov describes that this point in his life came in 1992, when he visited for the first time the Holy Trinity-Sergeev Lavra, which left him with “tears in his eyes and joy in his heart.”235

Suddenly, it turned into a simple realization of truth, that patriotism of the Russian people comes from the very essence of Orthodoxy, which calls for love of the earthly Fatherland (zemnoe Otechestvo) and considers this a fulfillment of Christ’s commandment ‘love thyself as thy neighbor.’236


235 Ibid.

236 Ibid.
Emphasizing the historical relationship that once existed between the church and the armed forces and its centrality to Russia’s future salvation, Cherkasov points out:

For centuries the construction and development of the Russian state, its army and navy were inseparable from each other and from Orthodoxy. This unity was broken artificially and must be restored…this is the only way to salvation and the preservation of Russia as a state.

He continues: “The spiritual rebirth of the Army and Navy of Russia on the basis of Orthodoxy is an absolutely necessary condition for the revival and preservation of Russia as a state.” This spiritual rebirth has been characterized in terms of a return of spiritual-moral behavior among the Russian troops, which has imposed a powerful form of disciplinary power over the bodies of predominantly male soldiers.

“Spiritual-moral education in the army is a process of forming high spiritual and moral qualities of defenders of the Fatherland, based on a belief in the sanctity of national ideals, love for native land, and the belief in the triumph of good over evil,” argued Aleksandr Belousov. The “spiritual and moral education of soldiers,” he continues, “has been and remains the cornerstone of military and church cooperation.” The usurpation of masculinity that this discourse engendered was again evident at a 2009 meeting between the Synodal Department of the Moscow Patriarchate and agencies of the Russian armed forces, where the topic of discussion was how to “shape the future patriot and

---

237 Ibid.


239 Ibid.
family man,” who is charged with “defending his country and his loved ones.”

Representatives of the Ministry of Defense, Russian Orthodox priests, professors from military academies, and other associated Orthodox staff and law enforcement personnel presided over plenary sessions such as “The Main Content of the Spiritual and Moral Needs of the Armed Forces of Russia,” “The Church and the Army: The Role of Orthodox Culture in Shaping the Spiritual and Moral Foundations of Military Service to the Fatherland,” and “Family Relationships: The Norm and Deviations.” Each session outlined the moral behavior that is expected of conscripts and tied this behavior directly to the timeless and unchanging Orthodox teachings that are said to be at the heart of Russianness. It is the soldier’s duty to fight against those who disavow such teachings, while standing up for the spiritual and moral principles that are Russia. As Cherkasov remarked, “Our church teaches that while there is evil in the world, it must be fought against. In Orthodoxy, good and evil are seen as absolute categories” that must remain distinct as soldiers take up arms.

Central to this discourse has been the revival of the “traditional” family, upon which the survival of the Russian state itself is predicated. As Major General Karim Gasanov stated in 2009, “We know that a strong family [is] the foundation of any state. The high purpose of the family is the birth and raising of children, passing on the spiritual, moral, and cultural heritage to the new generation.” At the University of


241 See Cherkasov.

Moscow Russian Interior Ministry curricula have been developed that focus on the “basic family values” that form “meaningful professional and personal qualities in the young defender of law and order.” These teachings, which tie together the disciplinary power of the armed forces with the moralizing discourse of the church, have oftentimes been brought to life by memorialized heroes of the past, whom church officials and military personnel view as representing a sort of Ideal for contemporary soldiers to emulate. By memorializing these deceased heroes and inserting them into a contemporary discourse of Russianness, the church creates a symbolic representation of the indisputable timelessness of Orthodox teachings and its centrality to traditional ideas of what it means to be Russian.

In a controversial move on August 14, 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church voted in favor of canonizing Tsar Nicholas II and the Romanov family. After a long debate between Patriarch Aleksii II and approximately 150 bishops over the tsar’s qualifications for sainthood, with some participants pointing out the tsar’s inability of stopping communist takeover in Russia, and others lamenting his weaknesses and unresponsiveness to his people, a ceremony was held at the newly consecrated Cathedral of Christ our Savior, and the Romanovs were glorified for their piety, humbleness, and unending Orthodox faith. Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra Federovna, their five

---

243 Ibid.

children, and even a few of their servants, were named saints strastoterptsy, or martyrs.

As proclaimed at the August 2000 Bishops Council in Moscow:

In the last Orthodox monarch of Russia and in the members of his Family we see people who sincerely sought to live by the commandments of the Gospel. In the suffering endured in captivity by the Imperial Family with humbleness, patience and meekness, in their martyrs’ death during the night of 4 (17) July 1918, the evil-defeating light of the faith of Christ was revealed.\textsuperscript{245}

For the church, the death of the Romanovs symbolized the death of Russia, which would languish under communist rule for more than seventy years before experiencing its Orthodox revival. Although some of Nicholas’s leadership capabilities were questioned, Russia’s last tsar represented true, or authentic Russianness—someone who lived a pious family life, which he ultimately surrendered for the Fatherland.

The canonization of Tsar Nicholas II, in addition to the commemoration of national heroes such as Prince Vladimir, who is credited with founding Orthodox Rus’, and Prince Aleksandr Nevsky, who defended Russia against the Teutonic Knights in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, represent the Orthodox Church’s efforts to infuse Russia’s military with patriotic symbolism of the past, while simultaneously holding up these Ideal men for contemporary soldiers to emulate. Although the church also recognizes heroes of WWII and other more recent events, a striking feature of most of the men who are glorified in church discourse is that they are no longer living, and therefore are incapable of responding to the ways in which their lives have been portrayed. Their biographies are no longer in a process of “becoming,” but rather have been fixed in both space and time. Each of these men is made by the church to represent a time in which soldiers abided by “natural,” God-given imperatives, relinquishing their lives for the preservation of these

\textsuperscript{245} Quoted from Ibid.
teachings, which form the basis of Russian identity. Their resurrection in contemporary discourse demonstrates clearly the church’s efforts to generate a renewed sense of patriotism among the ranks that is based on heroic symbolism of Russia’s long past, while simultaneously defining the meanings of men’s lives in accordance with these historical teachings and practices of the church.

At a ceremony dedicated to the swearing in of conscripts in January 2010, priest Sergei Rybin encouraged young soldiers to “carry with honor and dignity the title of a Russian soldier,” which had been handed down to them by these great leaders of the past. Most importantly, soldiers were instructed to develop self-discipline and to be willing to give their lives for the homeland. As Rybin articulated to the new young soldiers:

> Although it is a peaceful time, you are called upon at any time to protect our Motherland and to give your life for it, which is a great honor and glory for the Russian soldier. I wish you all God’s assistance, good mental and physical health, internal discipline, and most importantly—victories over yourselves, so that you can really overcome all difficulties and become true warriors, real defenders of our country.246

Within this discourse, young conscripts are taught to embody the qualities of the great men who came before them, while attaining mastery over the self so that they, too, might aspire to such greatness—and to immortality. Each of these men is glorified not only for his service to the Fatherland, but also for living in accordance with supposedly unwavering spiritual and moral principles of the church, particularly with regard to their roles as leaders of their families.

After all, the family, for the Orthodox Church, is viewed as a *malen’kaia tserkov*, or “little church.” Within this family, men are expected to adhere to their “natural”

characteristics of strength, intellectual acumen, and leadership capabilities—while women are viewed as mothers and helpers who possess an essential nature that predisposes them to the home and children. As stated in the *Basis of the Social Concept*, which is essentially the church’s millennium manifesto:

> While appreciating the social role of women and welcoming their political, cultural and social equality with men, the Church opposes the tendency to diminish the role of woman as wife and mother. The fundamental equality of the sexes does not annihilate the natural distinction between them…

The maintenance of this distinction is a spiritual and moral issue, as demonstrated by treatment of women who transgress these natural boundaries and men who are considered to be “effeminate,” or who act on physical drives and desires that go against their natural, God-given essences. Unsurprisingly, marriage is one of the foundational elements of the traditional Orthodox family. As Patriarch Alexii put it, “Marriage and the family founded upon it is the first natural, established and blessed union by God between a man and a woman in the free election of a joint and mutual love.”

> It is the foundation of both society on earth and reflective of God’s kingdom in heaven. It is crucial for the proper upbringing of children, and therefore for raising a new generation of the Russian family that is once again guided by principles of Orthodox morality. From the *Basis of the Social Concept*:

> The role of family in the formation of the personality is exceptional; no other social institution can replace it. The erosion of family relations

---


inevitably entails the deformation of the normal development of children and leaves a long, and to a certain extent indelible trace in them for life.249

Through self-discipline and victories over the self, solders would become Ideal family men and true patriots of their country, which would put eternal life within their grasp—and provide for the future of the nation-state itself. As St. John of Kronstadt explained, in order to obtain eternal life, one must know God with their heart and mind, “reject worldly desires and passions, sinful habits, tendencies and proclivities to sin,” and have a “desire for perpetual holiness and perfection.”250 In other words, men must attain mastery of their bodies, rejecting earthly temptation and accepting the disciplinary teachings of the church; divorce, adultery, and pornography are denigrated as responsible for the downfall of both the individual and society. As a result of men’s transgressions and their failure to adhere to the “traditional roles of men and women,”251 children become delinquent, mothers are forced into the double burden of work and home, and the birth rate plummets. As Marina Vasil’eva stated in her presentation “Guardian of Order, the Father,” “The Russian family is experiencing a difficult crisis,” which is “associated with a change in the traditional roles of men and women. In the Christian world-view each sex has its place. Man is conceived by God not as a separate individual,” but as a being who has a specific role to play in family life.252 Lamenting the consequences of


252 Ibid.
this “family crisis,” Vasil’eva explains that “85 percent of children with behavioral problems grow up in ‘problem’ families,” which provide “fertile soil for crime.”253 The main causes of this catastrophe, according to Vasil’eva, are “selfishness (sebialiubie) and egoism,” “sexual freedom” and egoistic passion.254 A man’s behavior not only affects his own life and fate; it also has the potential to either make Russia great or lead to its demise.

Much of the military discourse that has recently emerged on the education of conscripts is so permeated with Orthodox teachings that it is hard to tell that it has as its audience soldiers, police officers, and military personnel. This discourse, which stipulates men’s behavior both in and out of uniform, exerts significant disciplinary power over the male body in ways that define individual Subjectivity as a property of the collective, and which by defining this Subjectivity in accordance with characteristics that are deemed to be timeless and “natural,” contributes to its finalization. It is men’s responsibility to not only perpetuate traditional familial practices—which will lead to a healthy generation that is equipped to handle the challenges that come its way—but to also defend these practices against threats that seek to undermine their role as comprising an authentic Russian heritage. Consequently, during their lives, men are defined in accordance with characteristics that the church considers to be indisputable truths; in their deaths, they are memorialized for leading a pious life characterized by these truths. “In the Imperial Army,” Archpriest Iliashenko explains, “an officer who betrayed his wife was expelled from the society of officers, because you cannot deal with a treacherous man. If you are

253 Ibid.
254 Ibid.
Unable to be faithful to your family, then you should not be relied upon.” In today’s army, it is apparent that little has changed. Russia’s military has become a symbol of the nation-state’s might, based on principles that must be upheld by the courageous men who make it possible to begin with.

Conclusion: Orthodoxy and Masculinity in the New Russia

In August 2010, seventeen years after the decriminalization of homosexuality in Russia, German Sterligov, one of Russia’s first legal billionaires whose fundamental Orthodox views are well known, proclaimed on the radio show Culture Shock that all gays and lesbians should be killed. “As it is written by the Apostle Paul, Let it be their blood upon their heads…This is what is written about homosexuals,” he adamantly professed. Then three months later, anti-gay protestors (which included ultra-nationalist skinheads standing beside devout Orthodox babushkas) hurled eggs and shouted insults at participants of an attempted gay rights rally in St. Petersburg—a rally, which, like others before it, was cut short due to rapidly escalating violence. Despite initial hopes that Russia’s inceptive democracy might precipitate a decline in deplorable scenarios such as these, institutionalized discrimination against those who diverge from rigidly defined gender identities—particularly masculinity—has proliferated since the downfall of the Soviet Union. Although Russia has made great strides in rehabilitating its economic and political institutions, such accomplishments have been accompanied by the ascendance of


Quoted from “Kill Gays, Lesbians” Call by Former Russian Billionaire on Russian Radio (2010).
increasingly powerful and politicized principles of the Orthodox Church—principles that define ideas of what it means to be Russian in unyielding, Orthodox terms, while engendering conceptualizations of masculine Subjectivity in which any transgression of the Ideal is viewed as immoral and fundamentally non-Russian.

Although the church would most likely condemn extreme viewpoints such as Sterligov’s, its increased presence in not only the military, but also in society and politics more generally, has engendered new debates over the ideas and traditions that characterize Russianness, as well as the practices and viewpoints that are deemed permissible. Since the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Orthodox Church’s influence has increased at a remarkable rate. During the late Soviet period, only about 6,800 churches and eighteen monasteries operated in what is now the Russian Federation. Upon the end of Soviet control, the church experienced a renaissance. Figures released by the Patriarch in February of 2010 indicate the existence of over 30,142 parishes served by 207 bishops, 28,434 priests, and 3,625 deacons. The church also presides over 788 monasteries, including 386 for men and 402 for women.²⁵⁷ By providing a common sentiment around which the Russian people could unite during the tumultuous post-Soviet period, Orthodoxy has made tremendous gains in prominence and stature: The patriarch is frequently in attendance at official state events; a national holiday has been established to mark Russia’s conversion to Orthodox Christianity in 988; and just before the Christmas season of 2010, Russia adopted a draft bill that has enabled the church to

reclaim up to 17,000 additional buildings, as well as museum pieces, that had been
confiscated by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

This increased prominence is reflected in public opinion surveys. According to
Levada polls, approximately 66 percent of the population within the Russian Federation
self-identifies as Orthodox, with Islam coming in at a distant 3 percent, and non-
religious/”other” comprising the remaining 31 percent.258 In fact, during each year
between 1998 and 2007, an average of 80 percent of the population had been baptized in
the Russian Orthodox Church.259 The Russian Center for Public Opinion Research
(VTsIOM) has reported slightly higher figures, citing a 73 percent following of
Orthodoxy in 2008.260 Yet despite this relatively high self-identification with the
Orthodox Church, as of 2008, only 5 percent of the population considered themselves to
be “very religious,” 39 percent never attended church, and 78 percent never received
communion.261 Only half of Russians believe in God, and many of those who do believe
also confess to believing in omens (21 percent) or sorcery and magic (8 percent).262 This
curious discrepancy indicates that Orthodoxy, while gaining in popularity in Russian
society and discourse, serves more as a marker of identity than as a deeply internalized

258 http://www.levada.ru/category/rubrikator-oprosov/religiya

259 Ibid.

260 “Press-Vypusk 789: Religia V Nashei Zhizni,” Vserossiiskii Tsentr Izuchenii Obshchestvennogo Mnenniia (VTsIOM) (Moscow, 2007),

261 See: http://www.levada.ru/category/rubrikator-oprosov/religiya

set of religious principles and values. Similar to the role that Communism played during the Soviet period, Orthodoxy functions as an ordering principle in the post-Soviet context—giving Russians something to grab onto during a time of tumultuous uncertainty, but not being wholeheartedly accepted by all. As Alexey Krindatch points out, “Under conditions of public frustration and low confidence placed in institutions of state power and political organizations the Church has been seen by many as a symbol of stability and a last stronghold of declining moral and family values.”

Orthodoxy has also been glamourized in films that emerged in the latter part of the post-Soviet period, where it is oftentimes mythologized as representing an authentic facet of Russianness that was suppressed by the Bolsheviks, but which is, at its heart, the epitome of Russian identity. Within such films, strong men who are devout in their faith and therefore able to rein in their passions in the face of temptation feature prominently. Aleksandr Kolchak, as portrayed in the 2008 historical epic film *Admiral*, exemplifies such a man. As a prominent naval commander who later went on to become the head of the counter-revolutionary White army during the Russian Civil War, Kolchak is, in many ways, portrayed as an Ideal Russian man. At the beginning of the film, Kolchak’s ship crosses paths with the SMS Friedrich Carl, an armored cruiser of the German Imperial Navy. As his ship is fired upon and seems all but doomed, Kolchak informs his men that the only possibility of victory (and survival) is to lure the German ship through the underwater minefield that the Admiral and his crew have just laid. As Kolchak’s ship

---


264 *Admiral* was directed by Andrei Kravchuk, who also directed the award-winning 2005 film, *The Italian*. 151
continues to be pounded by German ammunition, the Admiral leads his men in Orthodox prayer, asking for God’s protection and guidance. After a close call in which their ship almost hits one of its own mines, the Admiral’s prayers are answered, and the German ship is blown up and sunk.

Guided by marked intelligence and a cool demeanor, in addition to his powerful status and moderate attractiveness, Kolchak is rendered susceptible to many temptations—including an affair with Anna Timireva, the wife of his subordinate officer, Sergei Timirev. But as the Ideal Orthodox man, Kolchak, while confessing to his wife his sinful attraction to Anna, tells her: “You are my wife and I am your husband. That is how it always shall be.” Nevertheless, after hearing one of Kolchak’s speeches about the necessity of defeating the Bolsheviks and “restoring Russia,” Anna braves brutally frigid weather to find her true love. The love story continues throughout the end of the film, and the two eventually end up together. But in keeping with Kolchak’s Orthodox manliness, the affair is legitimized by the Admiral’s request for a divorce from his wife, and by a scene in which the Admiral and Anna are seen attending the Divine Liturgy together, presumably to soon be married. Finally, as history would have it, Kolchak is killed, rather unceremoniously, at the hands of the Red army. The film, which would have been unthinkable during the Soviet period but which has grossed over 38 million dollars since its production, makes this prominent admiral of the White Army—the Tsar’s army—into an almost saint-like figure. And in so doing, redeems Orthodoxy and its place in Russia’s past, as well as its future.

In addition to the promotion of Orthodoxy by church officials and its appearance in contemporary cultural productions, prominent politicians have also self-identified with
the faith and equated Orthodoxy with what meanings of Russianness. As Leustean points out, the origin myth of Orthodoxy and its continuous re-production over time has extended “from the mere *hic et nunc* to a supernatural reality offering legitimacy and power to religious and political actors.”\(^{265}\) In contemporary Russia, political figures such as Vladimir Putin and former Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov have spoken out prominently about the importance of reviving Orthodox tradition in contemporary society as a way of replacing what had been lost, and in so doing, have bestowed upon church teachings both legal and political backing. As Putin stated in a 2000 speech praising the Orthodox Church:

> The Russian Orthodox Church plays an enormous role in the spiritual unification of the Russian land after many years of life without faith, [of] moral degradation, and atheism…The church is recovering its traditional mission as a key fore in promoting social ability and moral unity around general moral priorities of justice, patriotism, good works, constructive labour and family values…the past decade has become a unique time for the real regeneration of the moral foundations of society.\(^{266}\)

It is not uncommon in Russia for politicians to use Orthodoxy as a means of enhancing their political standing by demonstrating, through shows of faith, their love and respect for Russia’s great past. Political figures are frequently in attendance at church functions, and the church regularly participates in political ceremonies and events. Some scholars have suggested that the relationship between the church and state is beginning to resemble the *symphonia* that was shared between the two institutions during much of pre-_____


\(^{266}\) “Putin Praises Orthodox Church,” *Reuters* (2000).
Soviet Russia, where the tsar was considered to rule by divine rite and the patriarch was regarded as “co-tsar.”

Yet as with any socio-political institution, the Orthodox Church bears within it divergent viewpoints and different levels of social conservatism. As Bourdeaux wrote in the mid 1990s:

[T]here is a fairly significant number of active priests and laity oriented toward the ideal, traditional for the monarchical period of Russian history, that the Orthodox autocratic reign is the only form of government worthy of the church’s blessing; but there are also many people—mostly members of the Christian democratic parties of the so-called liberal tendency—who believe that the modern Russian Christian social doctrine should be adopted from Western sources. These two tendencies at times are utterly polarized and frequently are expressed in extremist viewpoints.267

Perhaps the most prominent Orthodox priest who advocated interfaith dialogue and somewhat less conservative tendencies was Father Alexander Men, who oftentimes came out in favor of maintaining a strict separation between church and state, in addition to touting the practice of Orthodoxy based on principles of democracy. On September 9, 1990, Men was assassinated as he walked on a wooded path to the local train station from his home in the village of Semkhoz. In his article “Orthodox Bolshevism,” Mikhail Sitnikov suggests that the continually increasing power of the Orthodox Church—particularly regarding its inclusion in educational curricula—may eventually lead to a new form of totalitarianism that is characterized by Orthodoxy rather than communism. Although this viewpoint is rather strong, the increased prominence of the church in Russian society and the potential consequences of this presence cannot be ignored.

By appealing to popular desires for a return to “normality”—to an almost primordial conceptualization of Russian identity—Orthodox discourse has become institutionalized in Russian society, where its conservative tenets have borne not only normative sanctions, but oftentimes legal sanctions, as well. As Aleksandar Štulhofer and Theo Sandfort have written:

> [R]ising religiosity and the growing social impact and influence of the Church as the ultimate moral authority strengthened conservative viewpoints and policy initiatives, especially in discussions on abortion, sex education, homosexuality, gender roles, and family violence.²⁶⁸

A return to “traditional,” God-given gender identities has comprised a substantial portion of the church’s post-Soviet discourse, which, when backed by the state, has borne important legal and political consequences for both gay and straight men alike. The state, which controls the police, media, and educational system, frequently employs the discourse and symbolism of Orthodoxy in appeals to national unity, and has supported initiatives such as the inclusion of Orthodox education in public schools, the establishment of exclusively Orthodox ministry for the military, and the prohibition of artwork and literature that portrays “moral depravity,” or which in any way denigrates the Orthodox faith. Whether society will continue along its conservative trajectory or begin to adopt more liberal tendencies will depend on much more than the influence of the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, it cannot be disputed that the church plays a powerful role in Russian society and politics, where it impacts the lives of men and women alike.

Figure 1: Orthodox Priest Blessing the Troops: Photo from RIA Novosti

Figure 2: Military-Orthodox procession, source unknown
CHAPTER FOUR
PERFORMATIVITY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF MASCULINITIES IN LATE SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET FILM

Everyone knows that there was “no sex in the Soviet Union.” At least, such was the proclamation of a woman in the audience of a 1986 televised talk show when asked about sex in the Soviet media. And indeed, the woman’s assertion largely rang true. Although topics such as contraception, abortion, and incentives to produce big families had become mainstays of official political discourse, all such issues were framed within the building of communism and the good of the Soviet state, while censorship ensured that almost nothing was spoken publically about matters of sexuality, relationships, or the existence of gender identities that deviated from the official party line. As Laura Engelstein points out, “it was precisely the ability to represent, elicit, and satisfy sexual desire in publicly available forms that the regime inhibited; it repressed sex as a cultural language and commercial practice.” It wasn’t until 1988 with the screening of Vasili Pichul’s now infamous Malen’kaia Vera (Little Vera) that the silence was broken and the assertion was made, through the portrayal of a sex scene that was rather tame by contemporary standards, that people really did have such enjoyable encounters outside of the confines of marriage. During the first showings of the film in Moscow, members of the audience reportedly stormed out of the theater in protest of the unspeakable having

been spoken. The film went on to receive six awards, including “Best Actress” for Natalya Negoda’s performance as Vera, and with over fifty million viewers, became one of the Soviet Union’s most popular films.\(^{270}\)

It was not that Soviet citizens were so puritan in their beliefs that they had never before engaged in such practices themselves, or that they were somehow innocently unaware that such things took place. Rather, Soviet life had come to be defined by an official vocabulary that only allowed for the expression of ideas, identities, and practices that were fully sanctioned by the state. Within this vocabulary, the limits of permissibility were rigidly defined in accordance with very particular ideas of what it meant to be Soviet. It was a context in which the private had been subsumed by the public, and where the characteristics of citizens were supposed to be synonymous with those of the empire. With the decline of the state and the introduction of *perestroika* and *glasnost*’ came a “discursive ‘sexual revolution’,” where “sexual values became a critical battleground for national regeneration.”\(^{271}\) As negotiations began to take place over topics such as sex education in schools, marriage, and family planning, an onslaught of cultural productions emerged on the scene that directly tackled the confused relationship between gender identities, sexuality, and the identity of the nation in the post-Soviet period. Literature by the likes of Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin, and Venedikt Erofeev mocked both Soviet ideology and capitalist “democracy,” oftentimes using blatant references to sex and the

---


body in their critiques of post-Soviet life. And as the work of Brian Baer, Luc Beaudoin, Dan Healy, Helena Goscilo and others has illustrated, pornography, in both text and on film, quickly became a powerful means of expressing what had hitherto been prohibited.272

This expression of the previously inexpressible was not merely a result of the elimination of censorship and the opening of Russian society—rather, questions of sex, gender, and modes of acceptable conduct have become deeply implicated in Russia’s quest for an identity, or Idea, that is uniquely its own. As discussed in previous chapters, the decline of the Soviet state has oftentimes been regarded as masculinity lost. The once powerful Fatherland, now weak and impotent, had been prostituted out to the West, both economically and culturally, with the now fragile Motherland left to fend for herself. As Russians sought to forge a new network of meaning in which their lives would once again make sense, the contours of masculine Subjectivity were simultaneously redefined in accordance with ever-changing ideas of Russianness. And the characteristics of this Subject were as indeterminate and conflicted as definitions of Russia itself. Sexuality, ethnicity, and religion became terms of negotiation in an unceasing tug of war between “centripetalizing” discourses of the church and state, which have sought to revive so-called “traditional” norms and practices, and alternative voices that seek to push back against both Soviet life and the new Russian establishment in order to make room a more open and permissible future.

272 See especially Ibid. Also see: Helena Goscilo, New Members and Organs: The Politics of Porn, The Carl Beck Papers (University of Pittsburgh: Center for Russian & East European Studies, 1993).
These alternative voices, transmitted primarily through cultural productions such as literature, art, and film, have generated substantial controversy in both society and politics. In 2002, Sorokin was charged with the dissemination of pornography for portraying Josef Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev as gay lovers in his novel *Goluboe Salo* (*Blue Lard*). Around the same time, the pro-Kremlin youth group “Moving Together” made headlines when they ripped up Sorokin’s novels and threw them into a giant toilet. The legal charges were eventually dropped, accomplishing little more than to generate public interest in Sorokin’s novels, causing its sales to spike. In 2007, seventeen pieces of artwork were removed by the government from the exhibit “Sots-Art: Political Art in Russia” for their supposed immoral content. The exhibit was finally reopened in Paris, where it gained considerable notoriety. Then again in 2009, an art exhibit that was organized at the Sakharov museum by Tretyakov Gallery directors Andrei Erofeev and Yuri Samodurov drew criticism for bringing together works that were considered to be “pornographic, antireligious, or otherwise objectionable.” Clearly, literature and art have served as popular mediums for those attempting to push back against the establishment and forge a space for something new. Yet they both, by nature, remain somewhat hindered in the extent of their discursive reach: literature pushes the boundaries of acceptability through language and engages the reader in dialogic exchange, but it is limited in scope by the confines of a finite vocabulary; art, likewise, is oftentimes restricted to visual techniques alone. Film, on the other hand, incorporates

---


both linguistic and visual mechanisms into a larger discursive text that includes elements of performance, symbolism, lighting, and sound, drawing the viewer into a creative dialogue that is at once interpretive, subversive, and a powerful means of resistance.

As Robert Stam has pointed out, “Film not only includes utterances in the form of verbal discourse; it is itself utterance, a socially informed communication.”275 Once tightly controlled by the state as a finely tuned instrument of propaganda, post-Soviet film has come into its own as an influential social and political commentary—a commentary that engages with both the past and the present, and which renders the audience implicit in the construction of meaning on a variety of levels. Pornographic film aside, contemporary Russian productions are well equipped to grapple with the highs and lows of Russian history, in addition to coming to terms with the tumultuous changes that have taken place in over the past few decades. Some point to a more radiant future; others are less optimistic. But in both cases, they address in some unique way the context in which they are situated and the challenges of etching out a new identity in an uncertain time. In many respects, film functions like a language—where camera angles position the actors in relation to both one another and the audience; and where a story unfolds through the construction of multiple layers of interpretive dialogue. Through the performances of the actors themselves, diverse gender identities, sexualities, and their relationships to ideas of Russianness are brought vividly to life. And through such gendered performances, the parameters of both masculine Subjectivity and ideas of what it means to be Russian are perpetually redefined.

This chapter evaluates the ways in which masculine Subjectivity is called into question, negotiated, and reshaped as a signifier of Russianness in post-Soviet film. Whereas the preceding two chapters elucidate the ways in which discourses of the church and state have contributed to rigid conceptions of both masculinity and the nation, this chapter deviates somewhat from this emphasis to suggest that film, as a creative and fluid medium that is no longer directly regulated by the state, provides a means of contesting identities that have become hegemonic and oftentimes unquestioned as quintessentially Russian. Drawing largely from the work of Judith Butler, the argument is made that performativity, as an element of discourse, makes it possible to displace essentialist conceptions of masculinity and to forge a space for the construction of diverse masculinities that signify Russia in all its complexity. Performativity enables the emergence of fragmented Subject positions—the construction of multiple, oftentimes contradictory masculinities that interact with symbols of Russianness in ways that challenge the monolithic and centripetalizing status quo of both “normal” or “natural” masculinity and “authentic” Russian identity. Through such performances, masculinity becomes enmeshed in a historical web that is at once mocked, ridiculed, and reshaped. Film simultaneously speaks to a context that is in perpetual transition, and encourages the audience to participate as co-creators of a new Russian text. Within such works, the familiar is both evoked and displaced, new associations are made, and the audience is rendered implicit in the construction of the film’s meaning, which is connected directly to the larger social and political milieu.

The first section of this chapter traces shifting constructions of gender identities in Soviet and Russian film, where film was first employed as a medium of state-sponsored
propaganda, and then later became both a reflection of contemporary affairs and a powerful means of resistance and change. As an industry that had previously been not only regulated, but also subsidized by the state, film production underwent a severe decline with the downfall of the Soviet Union, with the end of Soviet support eroding both the quality and the quantity of the films produced. Next, I provide a brief theoretical lens for interpreting performativity as negotiation and resistance in late Soviet and post-Soviet film. Drawing from the work of Judith Butler, gender identities are presented as contingent constructs that can be reshaped through displacement and critical reformulation. Ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin help to elucidate the role of the viewer in co-creating meaning in Russian film. Lastly, these concepts are applied to three prominent films, dating from 1990, 1997, and 2004, respectively: Pavel Loungine’s Taxi Blues (Taksi bliuz), which portrays the late-Soviet “crisis” of masculinity with vivid lucidity; Aleksei Balabanov’s Brother (Brat), which is oftentimes credited with reviving the fledgling Russian film industry with its portrayal of a new national hero; and Olga Stolpovskaia and Dmitri Troitski’s You I Love (Ia liublu tebia), which has been enthusiastically proclaimed by some as Russia’s first major gay film. Through an analysis of masculine performativity in each of these films, an attempt is made to demonstrate the ways in which alternative voices have asserted their independence amid a flurry of state-sponsored narratives, providing new possibilities for conceptualizing both the nation and constitutive masculinities.

**Russian Film: from Propaganda to Impetus for Change**

Vladimir Lenin once referred to film as “the most important of the arts.” Viewed during Soviet times as a mechanism for the dissemination of propaganda, film was...
revered for its ability, through techniques of visual imagery, lighting, and sound, to deliver powerful messages to audiences from diverse linguistic, educational, and economic backgrounds. Silent films such as Sergei Eisenstein’s 1929 *The Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosetz Potemkin*), Alexander Dovzhenko’s 1930 film *Earth* (*Zemlia*), and Dziga Vertov’s 1930 production of *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*) made possible expressions of society in its revolutionary development, while simultaneously forging a space for a radiant future that was yet to be realized. By infusing familiar contexts with new elements of Soviet symbolism, filmmakers acquired the ability to not only sketch out a future reality for their audience, but to also position the audience within that reality in very specific ways: Camera angles could establish the viewer as the master of a new tractor or as subordinate to an authoritative leader; perpetual motion, created through techniques of montage and enhanced by upbeat musical scores, situated the viewer as a catalyst in processes of rapid social change; and through powerful imagery of a repressive empire lost, the viewer was encouraged to abandon the past and engage in the pursuit of a future in which imperialism would have no place. Soviet film did not simply convey information unilaterally to a passive viewer—it drew the viewer into the film itself and made her or him an integral part of the building of “socialism in one nation.”

Within this most important art form, the social identities and potentialities of men and women were clearly defined, and were presented as mutually constitutive of the inceptive Soviet empire. Films such as *Chapaev* (*Chapaev*), which glorifies the career of the Red Army leader Vasily Chapaev and highlights the capabilities of women in the Revolutionary effort, and *The Circus* (*Tsirk*), a 1936 melodramatic comedy that tackles
issues of racism in its portrayal of Russia as a multiethnic land, demonstrate in particular the centrality of the New Soviet Man to the building of a communist utopia. As John Haynes has described him: “Clean-cut and square-jawed, the New Soviet Man was the figurehead of the people’s government of the revolutionary Soviet Union, the populist proselytizer of a qualitative change in human nature.”

Men in Soviet film were to embody the empire. As soldiers, laborers, or aviators, men were portrayed, particularly during the height of Soviet industrialization, as machines whose bodies were hardly their own. Since “no single part of the machine was counted as self-valuable, all Soviet citizens could be portrayed as working in synchronized harmony, as a team, with no more than the customary lip-service paid to the Party as the ‘driving axle.’” Largely through portrayals of masculinity as tantamount to the Soviet project, society itself became “masculinized.” The performance of heroic deeds brought to life a strong and powerful empire that was embodied by idealized masculinity, while concretizing “normal” masculine Subjectivity in terms of this mechanized heterosexual Ideal.

Filmmakers of the early and mid-Soviet periods were well adept at ensuring that their productions were shining examples of state ideology; to do otherwise, particularly at the height of Stalinism, would have proven perilous at best. However, as a malleable form of high art with a variety of discursive tools at its disposal, film has also provided opportunities for expressing viewpoints that have not necessarily been fully sanctioned by the state. The religious themes of Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev* (1966), as well as

---


277 Ibid., 42.

278 Ibid., 43.
the blunt symbolism of late Soviet-era films—such as the 1975 film *The Irony of Fate (Ironiiia sud’by)*, the 1981 Academy Award winning *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears (Moskva slezam ne verit)*, and the infamous 1988 film *Little Vera (Malen’kaia Vera)*—demonstrate some of the ways in which film has historically lent itself to creative interpretation, and at times, outright resistance to an otherwise monolithic and centripetalizing discourse. This bifurcated form of representation, in which film is capable of both exposing unappealing characteristics of the present and constructing a future that is yet to be realized, became especially prominent toward the end of the Soviet period and in post-Soviet Russia, once censorship had been lifted and producers were free to create works that at once entertained and shocked. No longer required to fulfill propagandistic purposes, film in contemporary Russia has developed into a powerful means of exploring and negotiating identity on a variety of levels. Within such works, the boundaries of what it means to be Russian, as well as ideas of masculinity and femininity, are perpetually tested and redefined.

With the downfall of the Soviet Union came a dramatic decline in the Russian film industry. Formerly subsidized by the state, production studios such as Mosfilm, Lenfilm, and Gorky Studio were left with no financial support and little audience interest. As Birgit Beumers has discussed, “What remained were large, unmanageable film studios which were gradually split up into small, independent production companies and privatized.”279 And as a consequence of the dire financial situation of the time, film production plummeted sharply: only twenty-eight films were released in 1996, compared

to 300 in 1990 (when filmmaking was a popular medium for money-laundering). The film-going audience also declined precipitously, with ticket sales in 1996 dropping to roughly one-fifteenth of the 1990 total. According to Susan Larsen, only 10 percent of the films playing in Russian movies theaters were even produced in Russia, and of that 10 percent, only 5 percent had been produced recently. Imported television productions, especially badly dubbed Mexican soap operas, became more accessible and in some ways more entertaining than shoddy Russian films. Yet along with this decline of the film industry also came increased opportunity. Filmmakers were no longer restricted to the monoglossic and monologic confines of Soviet ideology, but rather were free to portray Russia in all its complexity—a complexity that involved coming to terms with the past, exposing the shortcomings of the present, and deciphering what it would mean to be Russian in a new and uncharted future.

In productions that were intended to expose and poke fun at both the failures of Soviet ideology and capitalist “freedom” in the new Russia, filmmakers of the early post-Soviet period rejected imperatives to construct a radiant future; they also moved away from the dissident defense of spiritual values that had taken place primarily underground during Soviet times. Instead, they portrayed the reality of the post-Soviet context with striking lucidity. As Beumers explains:

What they saw was a bleak picture: beggars on the streets, impoverished pensioners, economic chaos, street crime, Mafia shootings, pornographic

---

280 See Ibid. 2.


282 Ibid. 193.
magazines and videos, decaying houses and ramshackle communal apartments, and the emergence of a new class, the New Russians, who adapted quickly and learnt how to make money in a society under reconstruction.\textsuperscript{283}

In both literature and film of the early post-Soviet period, authors and directors were intent on capturing the ugliness of everyday life, while simultaneously attempting to grapple with both successes and failures of the past. As Liliia Nemchenko points out:

\begin{quote}
The experience of changing paradigms of the view of the world, of a way of life, of values; the experience of a search for identity, often in negative terms…the continuous reassessment of the past, along with nostalgia and ruthless criticism—all these factors had to be assimilated by contemporary cinema.\textsuperscript{284}
\end{quote}

This effort to come to terms with both the past and the present is exemplified by films such as the late Soviet production \textit{Come and See (Idi i smotri)}, which poignantly exposes to viewers the atrocities that were inflicted upon the Soviet Union during the Second World War. A host of other films have attempted to grapple with the ethnic conflict that proliferated toward the end of the Soviet period and into contemporary Russia. Films such as Pavel Lounguine’s 1991 production \textit{Luna Park (Luna Park)} uses powerful metaphors and symbolism to deal with issues of anti-Semitism in the late Soviet period and to portray the roller coaster ride that was society at the time. Sergei Bodrov’s 1996 production of \textit{Prisoner of the Mountains (Kavkaskii plennik)} reinterprets the original short story in a way that enables a more hopeful understanding of the conflicts in the Caucuses, presenting expressions of masculinity that differ from those mandated by the confines of Soviet ideology and linking them to new manifestations of Russian

\textsuperscript{283} Beumers, \textit{Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema}. 1.

identity. In each of these examples, the negotiation of the nation and its ideals are brought to life through the performances of the main characters, most of whom (particularly in the war films) are men. Through such performances, men come to embody and signify both the strengths and the fragility of the Soviet, then Russian experience. In turn, ideas of what constitutes normal, or natural masculinity are shaped and redefined.

The post-Soviet period has witnessed an onslaught of diverse cultural productions that have each contributed to understandings of Russianness after communism. Film from this timeframe necessarily reflects and grapples with the context in which it is produced, while simultaneously engaging in a “dialogue with itself and with the traditions of Russian (pre-1917) and Soviet (post-1917) film and literature.”\(^{285}\) Within such productions, masculine Subjectivity is framed as a prominent signifier for what it means to be Russian—whether this identity is falling apart, such as portrayed by the two protagonists in *Taxi Blues*, or is being cautiously revived, as is evident in *Brother*, or is being intentionally mocked and criticized from within, as is the case in *You I Love*. The male protagonists in each of these films are troubled in their own way, while simultaneously maintaining a particular inner strength. Through their performances, they signify Russia in all its complexities, while simultaneously enabling the possibility of resistance and change.

**Theorizing Performativity and Resistance through Film**

The notion that the masculine Subject is constituted discursively—within a symbolic order that precedes it and defined by a vocabulary of limited scope—is

oftentimes thought to preclude any possibility of agency or resistance. As Bert Olivier concedes, “At best, one can be ‘relatively’ autonomous, insofar as everyone, no matter how independently-minded, is to some degree dependent upon other people, on conventions and on things that he or she has not created, such as language.” Yet subscribing to the contention that meaning is only made possible within power-laden systems of representation that precede and outlive the actors that are caught up in them, and which are equipped with a language that is limited and finite, does not require an abandonment of the possibility of pushing back and forging a space for something new. Although discourse in many respects determines the contours of possibility with regard to Subjectivity, it is a construction that is shaped, molded, and transformed by the same social actors that are embedded within its nexus—actors who are capable of recombining signifying elements in ways that bring about new variations on a theme of universal import, thereby articulating alternative viewpoints and potentialities for self-definition. According to Olivier:

Wherever discourse operates, a counter-discourse can be activated, which means that dominant discourses can be discursively opposed from the position of the speaking subject, as opposed to that of the one that is ‘spoken’ or constructed.  

Subjects are able to draw on “intersecting alternative or counter-discourses which allow them to escape the straitjacket of monodiscursive determination.”

---


287 Ibid., 292.

echoes this claim, pointing out that “The environment in which discourse lives is a volatile, constantly evolving one, where meaning is constantly in dispute.”

This potential for resistance and change is not intended to imply that actors are capable of assuming positions outside of the discourses in which they are situated, asserting an essentialist agency that is unmediated by context. Rather, the implication is that through discursive mechanisms such as language, performance, and the strategic use of lighting, sound, and symbolism, it is possible to question the systems of meaning in which actors are positioned, disrupting constructions that have become “normalized,” revealing the lack that lies at the heart of hegemonic structures, and opening a space for the emergence of alternative possibilities. As Judith Butler explains:

To intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality, and to use, as it were, one’s unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim.

The disruption of this settled knowledge requires an acknowledgement that gender identities do not inhere in the actor, but rather are contingently constructed and maintained within different socio-temporal contexts:

[G]ender is in no way a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.


Through this stylized repetition of acts, gender identities are brought to life in a way that makes them appear to be “normal,” or “natural”—as emanating from an essential and unchanging nature. Yet as Butler maintains, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”292 Ideas of what constitutes “normal,” or “natural” masculinity and femininity inhere not in the actor, but in the socially constructed discourses in which actors are situated, which includes performance: “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”293 As with other aspects of discourse, performativity and associated gender identities are shaped by the context in which they are situated, while simultaneously giving form to that context. They are historically contingent, drawing from discourses and practices of the past, while in no way being unilaterally determined by them. Perhaps most importantly, the context that shapes identities and the performances that bring them to life is not static, but rather is malleable and can be reshaped by the actors that are embedded in its web. “Subjective experience,” Butler claims, “is not only structured by existing political arrangements, but effects and structures those arrangements in turn.”294

---


294 Ibid., 273.
It is largely through performance—both on the stage and off—that ideas of both the nation and masculine Subjectivity can be perpetuated, negotiated, and potentially displaced. Performance serves as a form of discourse through which national and gender identities are articulated, both within filmic texts and in the broader context in which they are situated. Within this discourse, the ways in which the body are displayed, positioned, and maintained are central. The body, as “an intentionally organized materiality,” “is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention.” Change is made possible by subverting the status quo, rather than maintaining convention and continuously repeating performances of the past as though they flow naturally into the present. As Butler has written: “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found…in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.” Consequently, the process of self-transformation and redefinition, on both individual and national levels, requires the displacement of established systems of knowledge and the forging of a space for new articulations to emerge—a process that can be cleverly facilitated by film, where performances are deliberately scripted and the bodies of actors carefully positioned in a way that challenges established and hegemonic norms and practices. Yet as Mikhail Bakhtin has taught us with regard to creative mediums such as literature and film, the production itself is only half the story; such texts must also be interpreted and

295 Ibid., 272.
296 Ibid., 271.
internalized by the viewer, who becomes rendered co-creator of the meaning that is constructed.

Film is unique in that it has at its disposal not only language, which has been somewhat inept at navigating the new complexities of the post-Soviet terrain—particularly with regard to matters of gender and sexuality—but also techniques of visual imagery and performance, which draw the viewer into an “interpretive community” based around a particular filmic text. Drawing from Bakhtin, film may be regarded as a form of discourse that comprises a heterogeneity of diverse voices, which combine to produce a text that is subject to interpretation and is perpetually unfinalizable, but which nevertheless is capable of altering the boundaries of acceptability of the broader socio-political community in which it is situated. Within this “text,” the viewer is not only a passive recipient of predetermined meaning, but rather is invited to participate in the construction of this meaning. As Flanagan convincingly argues, film, like the novel, may be regarded as “not only the producer of meaning but also the site and recipient of meanings projected back onto it by its dialogic communicant and adversary, the spectator.”

Flanagan argues, drawing from Bakhtin, that a filmic text should be located within “the back and forth of anticipation, interpretation, reception and, inevitably, 

---

297 Flanagan, Bakhtin and the Movies, 8-9. At the end of the Soviet period, few options existed beyond highly scientific textbook jargon, on one hand, and profanity (mat), on the other, for discussing matters of sex and gender openly. Film has helped to overcome this impasse by combining language (which is oftentimes borrowed from the West, as can be observed with regard to words such as “gender,” “gai,” and “kveer”) with visual imagery and symbolism that gives meaning and a Russian slant to the previously inexpressible.

298 Ibid., 21.
argument that makes up that sphere in all its complexity and vitality.” In film, much of this anticipation and interpretation is fostered by the ways in which performance is attached to symbols of Russianness, which carry both positive and negative connotations. Such performances draw from the past and the present, grasping at pieces of meaning that together paint a vivid picture of both masculinity and Russian identity in the post-Soviet period.

In late Soviet and post-Soviet film, performances of masculine Subjectivity are intimately connected with symbols of the nation. The Subject embodies the trials and tribulations of the early 1990s, literally performing the nation through its attempt to navigate an inhospitable and meaningless terrain. In the mid-1990s, productions emerge in which a cautious sort of nationalist pride combines somewhat uncomfortably with an aura of hopelessness and despair. And by the early to mid 2000s, we begin to see a blatant mocking of not so much the Soviet past, but of the post-Soviet experience and the influences of a capitalism imposed by the West. The following section evaluates three very different films, each demonstrating the ways in which performativity is used to mock, ridicule, and displace the constructed realities of contemporary Russia, while providing for its subjects multiple positions that offer the potential to embrace new and less constraining possibilities. The first film, Taxi Blues, exposes the post-Soviet decline through performances of masculine Subjectivity and in many respects sets the stage for the others that follow. Although the film Brother and its sequel Brother 2 have been widely discussed in both academic literature and informal film reviews, any discussion on masculinity in post-Soviet Russia would be incomplete without at least a tertiary

299 Ibid., 20.
treatment of the film’s major themes. Lastly, the film *You I Love* diverges from the previous two in its relatively open portrayal of diverse gender identities and sexualities as linked to new conceptions of Russianness. Combined, these three diverse films offer a glimpse of Russia’s efforts to come to terms with both its past and a perpetually unpredictable future, while exposing the centrality of gender and sexuality—particularly masculinity—to the signification of Russianness during an uncertain time.

**Negotiated Masculinities in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Film**

*Class Schisms and Destabilized Masculinities in Pavel Louguine’s “Taxi Blues”*

Produced in 1990 and therefore technically a late-Soviet era film, Pavel Louguine’s *Taxi Blues* portrays vividly the displacement of both a coherent Soviet sensibility and a corresponding masculine Subjectivity. Representing a genre known as *Chernukha*, (literally, “black”), the film employs an unlikely male dyad—a jazz musician and a taxi cab driver—that generates questions of shifting class-consciousness, attitudes toward ethnic and religious minorities, and the ability to cope with an identity lost. Over the course of the film, a competition of sorts emerges between the two male protagonists, where the masculinity of one becomes propped up at the expense of the other’s emasculation. This derision, as Dawn Seckler has pointed out, falls unfailingly on “the one who initially articulates a patriarchal or Soviet point of view,” thereby rendering the performance of the main characters representative of the state of affairs in soon to be Russian society. As the “two masculine characters’ worlds collide, at least one man of the

---

300 Dawn Seckler, “Engendering Genre: The Contemporary Russian Buddy Film” (2009), 104.
pair becomes unhinged and comes to discover how his fundamental way of understanding the world around him is, in fact, a misapprehension of that world.”

The changes that each character undergoes over the course of the film in many respects speaks to changes taking place in Russia itself, where the Soviet hero was effectively displaced—men’s loss of status, their inability to make ends meet, and divisive gaps in class and status came to characterize the new Russian landscape.

Actor Piotr Zaitchenko plays Ivan Shlykov, a working-class taxi driver with a tough face and a muscular body. Piotr Mamonov, who was in real life a well-known rock musician with the group Zvuki Mu, plays a Jewish jazz musician named Lyosha Zeliverstov. Many film critics and viewers of Taxi Blues regarded Lyosha’s personality in the film to be indistinguishable from Mamonov’s own. A review in Iskusstvo kino suggested that “Mamonov didn’t play anybody in this film, not even himself—here he sought out himself. . . In this role, Mamonov perhaps lived out a certain portion of his own personal fate.”

Hence, the line between fiction and reality, performance on screen and performance in real life, was deftly blurred in this film, and the audience, who would have been familiar with Momonov and his musical history, were immediately brought into the film’s interpretive community. The masculinity that Mamonov embodied on stage was seen as almost synonymous as that in his everyday life and career—both direct reflections of the reality of the time. Through this performance, reality becomes twisted within a fictional narrative in which both the characters’ attributes and the context in

---

301 Ibid., 104.

which they are embedded are called into question, while a space is forged for a still uncertain future.

The stage of the film is initially constructed through a dualistic portrayal of Moscow: panoramic shots of the city during a holiday celebration, with red flags decorating a bridge where the celebration takes place and fireworks exploding in the background, is juxtaposed sharply with darker images of late 1980s-early 1990s Russia, including the entrance of Red Square that is still adorned with a picture of Lenin, and a scene of drunken rabble-rousers in search of a party and more vodka. This dualism is embodied throughout the film by the two main characters. Whereas Shlykov is portrayed as thick-necked, thick-skinned, and capable, although a bit hardened by life, Lyosha appears somewhat gaunt, frail, and lacking the strength of a working-class man. This contrast is maintained over the course of the film, where the two men are oftentimes portrayed side-by-side, but glancing in opposite directions. As Seckler aptly notes, this portrayal of the men together, yet maintaining their autonomy, suggests that two monologues are taking place. Because “the genre employs its characters to represent opposing points of view, it is reasonable to place characters in such a way that symbolically underscores that they do not see eye-to-eye.” As the film progresses, the characters’ physical personae become aligned with those of the city—and with the uneasy transition from Soviet life to the new Russia.

Our introduction to the main characters takes place inside a taxicab, where four men are cruising around Moscow after dark in search of excitement. Three of the four men eventually head home, leaving the alcoholic musician, Lyosha, with the task of

---

paying the driver, Shlykov, a seventy-ruble cab fare. Lyosha promises to pay the cab driver, but instead disappears into an apartment building on the edge of the city, stiffing Shlykov for the fare. Amid the decrepit backstreets of a declining city, Shlykov tracks down Lyosha, only to discover that Lyosha is unable to pay the fare in anything but fashionable Western clothing. Shlykov insists that Lyosha work off the fare, repaying his debt by washing cars for the taxi company. Lyosha soon moves in with Shlykov—a move intended to keep Lyosha out of trouble and away from drunken brawls. Soon after Lyosha moves in, Shlykov is seen confiscating his saxophone, which gives the audience their first glimpse of Lyosha’s former life as a famous musician, whose behavior has since turned irresponsible. The instrument becomes an extension—or perhaps rather a detachment—of Lyosha’s self-worth: Shlykov turns down the opportunity to sell the sax for a decent price, instead opting to save both the sax and Lyosha.

Through the performances of each male protagonist in *Taxi Blues*, the perils and contradictions of the late Soviet period are brought to life: a life in which a well-known Jewish musician finds himself scrubbing grime off the bottoms of taxi cabs; and where a poor cabbie is finally able to seek vengeance for a wrong committed against him—only to realize that he, himself, is fundamentally misguided. Shlykov clearly signifies the declining Soviet empire, whereas Lyosha signifies a much maligned, although somewhat more sophisticated presence. This signification is accomplished through performance, and through specific characteristics of each man’s body. As Seckler has pointed out with regard to Shlykov:

> His socialist persona is evident in his thick, muscular physique, in the places he frequents—his modest room in a communal apartment and his
workplace, the taxi depot—and in his violent reactions against people he perceives to be ‘class enemies’.\textsuperscript{304}

He is a late-Soviet representation of the New Soviet Man, but unlike the proletarian heroes of earlier Soviet fiction and film, his imperfections are made visible for the audience to see. His car (in Russian, his \textit{mashina}) enables the Soviet unification of man with machinery to take place, as might have been suggested by films such as \textit{Man with a Movie Camera} and \textit{Earth}. Yet unlike machines of the early Soviet period, which actually produced a product or altered the environment in some way, Shlykov’s car never seems to arrive at any meaningful destination. Rather, the driver spends his time shuttling around other people, relying upon the black market vodka economy to support his meager existence.

Nevertheless, Shlykov sees himself as a sort of Socialist Realist hero, trying to teach other people how to live, and for a while at least, unwaveringly believing in his own righteousness. He exercises on an antiquated contraption in his apartment, maintaining a muscular physique and positioning himself in the role of a mentor, or educator to Lyosha. The emphasis on Shlykov’s body hearkens back to earlier Soviet ideology directly, where a strong body was also believed to signify a strong mind and a strong nation in the Soviet empire. As Seckler notes with regard to Shlykov’s physical prowess, “the display of his physicality also communicates the high degree to which he quite literally embodies this dominant Soviet trope.”\textsuperscript{305} The physicality of his body and its unification with machines puts Shlykov into stark contrast with Lyosha, where it is, in

\textsuperscript{304} Ibid., 122.

\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., 132-133.
Shlykov’s view, his task to reform Lyosha and bring him into socialist consciousness. Yet this portrayal of Shlykov as a sort of late-Soviet “New Soviet Man” is anachronistic, as Shlykov is clearly not an Ideal Soviet man, nor do his actions any longer fit the context of the soon to be post-Soviet Russia. He displays blatantly anti-Semitic behavior towards Lyosha, who, despite having “a frail body and pallid complexion marred by deep-sunken eyes, missing teeth, and short-cropped thinning hair,”306 goes on to achieve international fame, leaving Shlykov with diminished authority and a realization of his ineffectuality. By the end of the film, Shlykov’s perception of late Soviet society—and of himself—has fundamentally changed.

The film begins with the premise that a hard-working, muscle-bound, Muscovite cab driver should be superior to the penniless, Westernized, alcoholic Jew. Yet as the film progresses, the audience is presented with the dilemma of Lyosha’s success and the downfall of the New Soviet Man. After watching scene after scene of Shlykov asserting his authority over Lyosha and others whom he deems inferior, the viewer is confronted with the realization that Shlykov’s work ethic no longer gets him anywhere—literally. Conversely, Lyosha’s dismissal of long-standing Soviet values enables him to experience a freedom of sorts, where his Jewish (non-Russian) identity does not impede his international success, and where the only “machine” with which he becomes united is his saxophone—a blatant symbol of anti-Soviet ideology. On his sax, he plays improvisational, free-form jazz—a form of music that had formerly been associated with

306 Ibid., 122.
bourgeois elitism and therefore highly suspect during much of the Soviet period. He is a holy fool of a new age: existing within an alcohol induced alternative reality, proclaiming himself as a “freak,” and claiming, like a saxophone-playing Rasputin, to communicate directly with God in his pursuit of success and notoriety. Lyosha’s rise to fame, it quickly becomes clear, is due in large part to his abandonment of antiquated Soviet ideology. Through his musical success, Lyosha embodies the failure of communism—and serves as a clear signifier of the Soviet Union’s demise.

Taxi Blues has been regarded by some critics as similar to the American “buddy film,” where two men come together around the necessity of solving a problem or navigating untenable circumstances. However:

Whereas the American buddy film, from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid to We’re No Angels, depicts opposites who come to appreciate each other and work together with a deepened appreciation for each other, Taxi Blues offers no such easy sense of growth, maturity, or acceptance.

Rather, the two male protagonists in this film represent very different aspects of the Soviet, and soon to be Russian experience. The film is a political allegory of sorts, where Shlykov—through his proletarian work ethic and unification with his car-as-machine—represents the old system, while the Lyosha attempts to come to terms with the new. As Herbert Eagle has written:

The film is naturalistic, ultra-realistic, in its raw depiction of what used to be forbidden territory for Soviet cinema: poverty, overcrowded living

307 The saxophone was illegal for a period of time during the rule of Josef Stalin, proclaimed too bourgeois to fit into the Soviet paradigm.

308 For a more detailed analysis, see Ibid., 133.

conditions, rampant alcoholism, a ubiquitous blackmarket economy, a disillusioned and depressed working class, and an aimless and cynical intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{310}

The more aesthetically pleasing aspects of Moscow are used as a Potemkin village of sorts, masking the ugliness that unsuccessfully hides behind its fabricated walls. This visual dualism is created through a unique cinematic style, which blends fiction with the reality of 1980s Moscow.

As Eagle has written with regard to the style of \textit{Taxi Blues}:

What might be termed Lungin’s hyper-realist style combines actual documentary realia, stylistic excess and paradoxical collisions to produce a full-scale assault on socialist realist norms and the aesthetic strategies that they encouraged.\textsuperscript{311}

The film blatantly displaces the mandates of Soviet Socialist Realism and the ideal of the “New Soviet Man,” aligning two very different masculinities with Russia’s transition into the post-Soviet period. The two protagonists in this film become signifiers of a past that is no longer welcome and a future that is disturbingly uncertain. For this portrayal, the film won the award for best director at Cannes in 1990 and went on to become a controversial, albeit popular with young audiences both in Russia and abroad. In a 1991 interview with NPR, director Louguine expressed his desire to have his characters represent the chaos and contradictions of the late Soviet period:

Of course, it’s a traditional Russian artist, it’s a traditional Russian Jew. It presents some chaos which is—which is now in Russia and the Soviet Union, where the people doesn’t really understand how they should live,

\textsuperscript{310} Eagle, “Review: Taxi Blues by Pavel Lungin,” 353.

\textsuperscript{311} Eagle 1993, 353
where to go and—you understand, it’s—it’s really, I wanted to show
some—a piece of real life with many contradictions.\footnote{Interview with NPR in 1991. Reproduced in ““Taxi Blues” Soviet Film About Social Tension.”}

And though this film, the contradictions of the late Soviet period come to life through the performances of these two men. The actors are living significations of both a hegemonic masculinity and a social stability that has been displaced and traded in for an uncertain future. In post-Soviet films of the mid-late-1990s, an attempt would be made to grapple with this uncertainty and reclaim a masculinity lost. The next film discussed, Brother, is a quintessential example of this new and subversive genre.

\textit{A New Hero of Our Time? Masculinity, Criminality, and a Reclaiming of Russia in \textit{“Brother”}}

Aleksei Balabanov’s 1997 production of \textit{Brat (Brother)} is oftentimes credited with reviving the Russian film industry. At a time when life was dismal, when intrusions from the West were seen as responsible for society’s problems and violence in Russia’s southernmost region was at its apex, and when the country appeared to lack anyone capable of remedying such maladies, the hero of \textit{Brother} appealed to a tired and hopeless audience—both for his relatively positive attributes, and for his blatant imperfections. The film, like many others that were produced during the mid-1990s, was somewhat cathartic in its portrayal of society it all its bleakness. A far cry from the techniques Soviet Socialist Realism that had been mandated during the Soviet period, where society was to be portrayed in both an idealized state and in its “revolutionary development,” there is no Ideal in \textit{Brother}, nor was there any hint of a shining, optimistic future. Rather, it is crime, violence, and a dilapidated city that set the stage for \textit{Brother}, and for its
troubled young hero Danila Bagrov, played by the famed actor Sergei Bodrov Jr., to navigate this rocky and unpredictable terrain. A crime film, *Brother* clearly differs from the chernukha model employed in *Taxi Blues*, where men are largely victims of their circumstances. This new “killer-hero” still “lives on the spur of the moment,” but now maintains a degree of control over his actions and his circumstances. Through the performativity of both Danila and supporting characters, who oftentimes appear as less than authentically Russian in light of the protagonist’s heroic deeds, masculinity is cautiously rebuffed and reclaimed, coming to signify both the problems and pride of the post-Soviet 1990s.

Physically, Danila has a strong and muscular build, and exhibits a calm and measured persona. Andrew Horton’s description of Danila as a “geeky-looking youth” is perhaps somewhat harsh; other critics have pointed out that although he is no Hollywood bodybuilder, the protagonist displays a strength of both body and spirit that Russia desperately lacked. As Yanna Hashamova has put it, “*Brother* introduced a new type of hero in post-Soviet film: the hit man who follows his own moral standards and becomes a Russian Robin Hood under the new social and political conditions.” Some critics have compared Danila to Chapaev, the heroic Red Army commander for whom a

---

313 Sergei Bodrov Jr., the son of director Sergei Bodrov, was one of Russia’s most prominent up and coming actors until his tragic death in an avalanche while on set in 2002.


315 See Figure 2.

316 Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film*, 43.
1930s Soviet film was named. Others claim that he has the face of a member of the Young Pioneers.\(^{317}\) And in a way, these disparate accounts are all accurate. Danila clearly signifies the complexities of the post-Soviet period—a time in which desperation and a lack of hope for the future were met with anger over the injustices that had been inflicted upon Russia and a desire to avenge certain wrongs, while reasserting a sense of capability and pride in Russia’s historical accomplishments. The hero of Brother is a young man who exhibits extreme maturity at times, while displaying an almost teenage preoccupation with music, drugs, and the concert scene, at others. He embodies Russia’s transition into capitalism, displaying both ruthless violence and a desire for something better. As Susan Larsen has argued, the “pathos” of films such as Brother

\[\ldots\text{derivates from a common anxiety about what it means to be Russian at the end of the twentieth century, and most of the films articulate that anxiety in terms of a threat to masculine ‘honor’ and ‘dignity’…or national ‘might’ and ‘right’.}\]  

\(^{318}\)

The film begins with Danila unapologetically traipsing through the video shoot of the rock band Nautilus Pompilius as they film their latest album, Wings. That Danila is introduced while interrupting the filming of another film is significant in that it establishes the hero as somehow more “real” for the viewer and less like a character who is being observed only from the outside. The actors in the “film within the film” are clearly acting, but viewers are now united with Danila in his vision of this staged performance, and on the journey upon which he will soon embark. The band and the song both acquire symbolic importance as the film progresses, as Danila plays Nautilus music

---

\(^{317}\) Ibid., 43.

on his personal CD player, pursuing a sort of escape from the grim reality in which he is ensnared. The song *Wings*, however, which laments the loss of a certain freedom, and explicitly confines the hero to his circumstances, remains out of Danila’s reach. An excerpt from *Wings* demonstrates powerfully these circumstances and, through feminine imagery of an abused Russia whose wings have been removed, simultaneously calls Danila to action and traps him within an inhospitable terrain:

> You remove your evening dress
> Standing facing the wall
> And I see fresh scars
> On your velvet-smooth back.
> I want to cry from pain
> Or forget myself in sleep.
> By the way, where are your wings
> which I liked?

> Where are your wings
> which I liked?
> Where are your wings
> which I liked?

> Before, we had time-
> Now we have things to do.
> Proving that the strong devour the weak.
> Proving that soot is white.
> We have all lost something
> in this mad war.
> By the way, where are your wings
> which I liked?^{319}

Over the course of the film, the song comes to serve as an anthem of sorts, symbolizing a loss of innocence and powerlessness experienced by the Soviet people, who now had to fight for their own survival, with no opportunity for escape.

When Danila is arrested for his intrusion in the film and for getting into a fight with the film’s producer, the viewers learn that he has recently finished his military

^{319} English translation from: [http://russmus.net/song/1536#1](http://russmus.net/song/1536#1)
service in the conflict-ridden Caucasus. He claims to have served in an administrative position, but his detailed knowledge of firearms and his willingness to use lethal force soon indicate otherwise. Danila himself is fatherless, further symbolizing the idea that he—and by extension, the youth of his generation—are now left to fend for themselves. He is eventually sent by his mother to St. Petersburg (which she still calls Leningrad) to live with his brother Viktor, who is supposed to be a positive role model for Danila and prevent him from suffering the same fate as his father, who was killed in a prison fight. As the viewers soon discover, however, Viktor turns out to be a hit man who quickly involves Danila in his criminal world, turning him into a contract killer for the mafia.

Through the relationship that emerges between Danila and his brother, we gain a greater understanding of the confused and interrelated statuses of both national identity and masculinity in 1990s Russia—and of the ability of filmmakers to express and mock this confusion through their characters. Viktor is not simply Danila’s brother. On many different occasions, Danila and his mother both describe the ways in which Viktor took his father’s place for Danila and helped to raise him like a son. This is an unreliable fraternity, however, as it soon becomes apparent that Viktor has set up Danila and is exploiting his brotherly camaraderie. Viktor enlists Danila to help kill a gangster known only as “the Chechen,” who is accused of being a former terrorist and is persecuting not only Viktor, but also the “Russian people” more broadly. Yet as the viewer knows, Viktor himself has long been hired by a rival gang of Russian bandits to kill the Chechen. This betrayal is a direct signification of the “betrayal” of the Soviet regime and the loss of patriotism that was experienced throughout the 1990s. As Larsen points out: “Viktor’s many betrayals of Danila’s trust suggest that brotherly love—like its national equivalent,
patriotism—is only a convenient fiction, not a moral absolute." The fiction in which many citizens had come to believe had been displaced, acted out vividly by two conflicted and disturbed male characters. Danila performs a distorted form of patriotism throughout the film, avenging wrongs that have been committed against the Russian people, while himself proving to be an imperfect new hero.

While going about his “business” as an assassin, Danila encounters a host of diverse characters, each of whom shapes his own persona in some unique way. And through his interactions with these characters, the viewers are presented with symbolism that links Danila’s masculinity with particular aspects of Russianness. On a grimy street infiltrated by crime and poverty, Danila comes to defend an older German man, known only as Hoffman, against a racketeer who is attempting to extort his meager profits. In this scene, Danila demonstrates a certain penchant for righteousness, while simultaneously demonstrating his anti-Semitic tendencies. Danila later befriends Hoffman, while clearly expressing his distaste for Jews. In another scene, Danila helps a tramway attendant collect the fares of two Caucasian passengers who are unwilling to pay. He refers to the culprits as “black-assed worms,” retrieves the money, and warns them to never return. Here his principled sense of responsibility comes into stark contrast with blatant racism and an effort to define a true Russian “us” against “them.” Then later in the film, Danila shoots in cold blood his girlfriend Sveta’s abusive husband, demonstrating once again his lack of tolerance for what he perceives as a wrongdoing, while expressing no remorse for taking a life himself. Through each of these encounters,

\[320^{320}\] Ibid., 504.
we see contradictions that make up the essence of Russianness during the mid-1990s, all signified by this “heroic” male protagonist. As Beumers has articulated this signification:

In the tradition of the romantic hero, he is a knight, who keeps his word; but he is also a killer. He combines within himself the contradictions at the heart of the ‘Russian Idea’: self-assertion and self-effacement, the right to judge and the compassion to redeem, West and East.\textsuperscript{321}

The idea that this hero is regarded as a “brother” rather than a father figure is also significant, as it represents the transition from a society in which men’s statuses were determined in relation to the state as an omnipotent father, to one in which a man’s status is determined in relation to other men, with no grand leader at the helm. At the film’s conclusion, Danila learns that his brother Viktor, who had been like a father figure to him, has set him up. Yet rather than avenging the wrong and shooting Viktor as coldly as he has dealt with the other hit men, the younger brother is shown sparing Viktor’s life, giving him money and sending him to Moscow to live with their mother. Viktor, the once powerful hit man who exploited his younger brother for criminal means, is seen cowering on the floor in tears—having become the victim of his own erroneous deeds. Although Danila is portrayed throughout the film as a ruthless killer who has no qualms with shooting his enemies in cold blood, the last few scenes of the film prop him up as a hero of sorts—and as a more Idealized new Russian man—where it becomes apparent that although such ruthlessness may be necessary for navigating the post-Soviet terrain, Danila is a true Russian hero.

Over the course of the film, questions arise with regard to whether Danila can be regarded as a new “hero of our time,” to invoke the famous writings of Mikhail Lermontov, or whether, as in Lermontov’s novel, Danila is more of an imperfect Byronic

hero. In either case, he is, as Beumers has pointed out, “the product of the absurdity and chaos of the time.” But was his character intended to put an end to the chaos, or provide the chaos with corporeal representation? To be sure, Danila is calm, measured, and boasts a strong and healthy physicality—something that contradicts the state of affairs (and the characteristics of many men) in Russia at the time. Yet the racism, anti-Semitism, and almost adolescent preoccupation with music, drugs, and the concert scene cast doubt on the promise of Danila as a hero. As Hashamova has critically observed, *Brother* “created a cult character and turned actor Sergei Bodrov Jr. into a cult figure in Russia mythologizing aggressive and xenophobic masculinity that marginalizes women.” It was a “hero” that appealed in particular to the younger generation who longed for a hero with whom they could identify, and for a way of making sense of a turbulent time. As Anna Lawton explains:

So, what if his values were not those of the archetypal hero? What if they were closer to those of a skinhead gang chief? What if the hero displayed zero values? No problem. The moral vacuum gives Danila unlimited freedom and superhuman power. The film exalts that power and caters to the aspirations of the young viewers.

Danila is, literally, an embodiment of the 1990s and a signifier of what it meant to be Russian during this difficult time.

Brother appealed to audiences because of its construction of an imperfect, yet capable hero—one that displaces the New Soviet Man and presents an alternative option.

---


323 Hashamova, *Pride and Panic: Russian Imagination of the West in Post-Soviet Film*, 42.

for something new. Yet it could be also be argued that *Brother* became popular, particularly with the younger generation, for its relative simplicity—and perhaps because, unlike most of the films that were produced during the turbulent 1990s, it was entertaining. As Lawton has written with regard to the film’s popularity:

This has been a great box-office hit, notwithstanding, or perhaps because of, the predictable plot and the sex-and-violence clichés borrowed from the American B-movies that had saturated the Russian screens in the past ten years.\(^{325}\)

Finally, Russia had its own action film, where the hero was not a muscle-bound Schwarzenegger type, but rather embodied desirable Russian characteristics, with all their imperfections.

**Russianness and Gay Masculinities in You I Love (Ia Liubliu Tebia)**

Dubbed enthusiastically by some critics as “Russia’s first gay-friendly film,” Olga Stolpovskaia and Dmitry Troitsky’s *You I Love (Ia Liubliu Tebia)* (2004) stands apart from the nationalist, war, and gangster films that dominated much of the 1990s and early 2000s. It is certainly a far cry from the *Brother* films that resuscitated the Russian film industry with their creation of a new, albeit imperfect national hero. And given that the first Russian film to show a sex scene wasn’t released until 1988 with the production of *Malen’kaia Vera* (Little Vera), and that anti-gay demonstrations had been gaining traction in social and political discourse throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the film is also unique for its open and relatively positive portrayal of diverse sexualities and relationships. Although it could be argued that the gay men in the film are in some respects portrayed as less than authentically Russian, and that the main female character

\(^{325}\) Ibid.
is highly sexualized, the film, partly by forging into new territory and partly through its interpretable presentation, provides a space for conceptions of both masculinity and Russianness to emerge that have rarely been possible publically. Through the performance of diverse masculinities, the film presents the viewer with a different set of options for thinking about masculine Subjectivity as an embodiment of what it means to be Russian in the contemporary period.

*You I Love* playfully depicts the intersecting lives of three main characters: Timofei Pechorin, an advertising executive who is caught up in Russia’s rocky transition to capitalism; Vera Kirillova, a sexy news anchor who, incidentally, is the only character in the film to speak in the first-person; and the exotic Ulumji, a young Kalmyk man who overcomes homelessness by tending to reindeer at the local zoo, and who dreams of becoming a circus performer. With striking lucidity, each character clearly embodies a certain aspect of Russia’s lack and the post-Soviet quest for meaning. As Andrew James Horton points out, it is clear that both Timofei and Vera “suffer from a certain spiritual hollowness in their roles as vanguard of Russia’s head-forward lunge into capitalism.”

Timofei seems disengaged from his work, playing video games during company meetings, and Vera has an insatiable appetite, unable to ever get quite enough food. Amid this lack of direction and unfulfilled desire, blatant symbols of consumerism abound: workers parading the streets dressed as company mascots literally embody the new capitalist landscape, and the repetition of the advertising slogan “Freedom is Cola!”

---

326 The significance of Timofei’s surname, “Pechorin,” is somewhat understated yet at the same time obvious, again harkening back to the Byronic hero of Mikhail Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*. Similarly, the name “Vera” means “faith.”

mocks both the capitalist enterprise and the idea that freedom is now a feature of the new Russia.

The first character to whom viewers are introduced is Ulumji, as he strolls the streets of Moscow in search of work. With his furry winter earflap cap and dark facial features, Ulumji is clearly a foreigner, whose slight build becomes intermingled among overt signs of capitalism, on one hand—such as a worker who is wearing a Nike windbreaker—and traditional symbols of Russianness, on the other—such as massive Orthodox cupolas and a tapestry displaying an image of the Virgin Mary. From the outset, it is clear that Ulumji has wandered into a confused city, where Russian tradition and Western capitalism have become uneasy bedfellows. Viewers are next introduced to Timofei and Vera—through performances, quite literally. The audience first comes to know to Timofei only through his voice, as he conducts market research by telephone. Our first glimpse of Vera is during one of her news broadcasts, where she laments the intrusion of migrant workers into the Russian capital. Such workers, Vera explains, are “detrimental to Moscow’s budget” and are “responsible for 11 percent of all crime in Moscow.” As these three characters become acquainted, the performance of each signifies the emptiness that persists in early 2000s Russia, while simultaneously etching a space for new possibilities.

A chance meeting during a pickpocketing incident in a Moscow café brings together Timofei and Vera, who begin dating and find in each other a certain fulfillment of a void by which each of their lives has been plagued—a void which is deeply intertwined with the social and cultural context of the time, and which is further complicated by the arrival of Ulumji, who, while performing a balancing act atop a fence
next to the road upon which Timofei is driving, falls onto the hood of Timofei’s car (an Audi) and literally drops into the couple’s life. When a Moscow hospital is unwilling to treat Ulumji properly, Timofei takes the unusual young man home and sets him up on his sofa to heal. The plot begins to thicken when Vera returns to Timofei’s apartment, only to find the two men sitting on the floor in their underwear, with Timofei’s hand resting casually on Ulumji’s thigh.

It is the scene just prior to Vera’s arrival that reveals a budding relationship between Timofei and Ulumji, and where once seemingly stable identities come to reveal much more complex and bifurcated Subject positions. Ulumji’s provincial character is highlighted when, rather than sleeping soundly on Timofei’s sofa, he is shown turning the lamp on and off, mesmerized by the fringe that accents the shade. When Timofei gets up to see what is going on, Ulumji asks him if he has anything to smoke, then offers to sing Timofei a folk song, at which point he dances mystically around Timofei until both men settle on the floor. Upon finding the two men together, Vera is at first surprised and annoyed, before reluctantly returning to the apartment and spending the night with Timofei. The commercial that appears on TV in the morning as the three uncomfortably share breakfast: “What is love? Love is Cola!” The next few scenes show Timofei’s gradual realization of his lust for Ulumji and his desire to enhance his physical fitness (which is intermingled with commentary on who makes the most or least amount of money) while Ulumji discovers the magazine GQ.

The scene that makes the men’s sexualities even more explicit and links them specifically to Ideas of Russianness is when Timofei and Ulumji again find themselves alone in Timofei’s apartment and engage in a wild, almost animalistic romp around the
living room. Ulumji begins jumping up and down on the furniture, then on Timofei’s lap, before finally engaging Timofei in comical frolicking that eventually leads both men to the bathtub, where, while fully clothed, they become soaking wet. As loud music thumps in the background, a statue of the composer Tchaikovsky, who is one of Russia’s most prominent gay historical figures, bounces off of a shelf and crashes onto the hardwood floor. Inconveniently, an older woman from the apartment below rings the doorbell and inquires about the screaming that she heard from above. Timofei explains that he had a “terrible dream”—a “terrible dream about love,” (strashni son pro liubov) smiles coyly, and returns to his scandalous escapade. The two men are eventually found by Vera, as they sleep together on a bear rug on the floor of Timofei’s living room.

As the female protagonist in You I Love, Vera engages in a bifurcated form of narration, acting out the conflicts between capitalism, tradition, and sexuality in the new Russia. As a news reporter, it is her job to enlighten Moscow (and the viewers of the film) about the goings on of the city, which include issues in which the other characters are implicated, such as migration. But as the only character to speak in the first person within the film itself, we also come to understand the other characters, and their relationships with one another, largely through Vera’s voice and the expression of her anxieties. After a night spent trying to come to terms with her boyfriend’s newfound bisexuality, Vera shows up at the news station exhausted and weary. In true Russian style, she takes a shot of vodka and carries on with her work as the quintessential suffering woman.

Over the course of You I Love, symbols of capitalism become directly linked to representations of masculinity and sexual prowess. While Timofei and Vera are eating
lunch in a trendy Moscow café, Timofei explains to Vera that although he likes his work in advertising, he finds it to be exhausting. He tells her that his friend used to work at the stock market, “and his virility depended upon the value of the dollar.” Sometimes, Timofei explains, “he was basically impotent.” Vera, meanwhile, can’t get enough of her salad, and when one of Timofei’s commercials is broadcast in the café, she suggests enthusiastically that they order pizza, as well. In the next scene, Ulumji is revealed to be so “backward” and lacking of masculine prowess that he fails to comprehend the workings of an ATM. “See how much money there is!” he exclaims to his older male companion from the zoo. “I tried to stick my card in there, but nothing happened.” Later in the film, capitalism is further dissociated with Ideal Russianness when the business/marketing director for whom Timofei works, who is black and speaks mainly English, also turns out to be gay.

In many respects, the film You I Love raises as many questions as it answers, leaving the viewers to fill in the gaps and come to their own conclusions. Other than Timofei’s work life, we know relatively little about the character’s background. Has he engaged in relationships with men in the past, or is this experience with Ulumji truly novel for him? Similarly, as the primary narrator of the film, Vera provides snippets of information about her own understanding of this unusual situation; but these accounts are fragmented and never seem to lead to a grander conclusion. As Gerald McCausland laments:

At times we seem to be hearing the story of Vera’s path to a kind of Buddhist enlightenment, a developing ability to see beyond the limitations of the material and social world in which humanity tries to exist. But this
narrative voice is not sustained, nor is Vera the focal point for the larger storyline. And perhaps most conflicted of all is the character Ulumji, who is made to appear stereotypically “backward” and exotic—seducing Timofei through hypnotic ritual, invoking Eastern mysticism in his everyday life, and entirely unfamiliar with anything modern, such as the lamp in Timofei’s living room or the workings of an ATM. But at the same time, Ulumji oftentimes comes across as the most insightful character in the film. In his primitive “half-civilized man-boy” state, he is untainted by capitalism and the fast pace of life in the new Russia.

Despite the ambiguity that permeates the characters and their relationships in You I Love, sexuality as a marker of identity in contemporary Russia takes center stage. As McCausland remarks, “this fluidity of identity is neither celebrated nor mourned, but rather put on display in a way that is half play and half manipulation.” Both Timofei and Ulumji overcome great obstacles in the actualization of their sexuality, but their performances remain somewhat mediated and confined to the reality of contemporary Russia. For Timofei, it is the world of advertising and televised representation that keeps both his history and the authenticity of his bisexuality at bay. Ulumji is trapped by traditions and stereotypes, which equate his (presumably) homosexuality with mysticism and an almost feminine presence. Nevertheless, unlike most Russian films, You I Love ends happily. The three characters eventually come to an arrangement in which they can


329 Ibid.

330 Ibid.
coexist, with Vera eventually having Timofei’s baby and all three raising the child together. Debates over whether this film is truly a positive representation of gay masculinities aside, it is a relatively open portrayal of diverse Subjectivities that had long been silenced in Russian discourse. Its prominence—and the fact that it was produced and shown publically at all—are positive developments that once again demonstrate the ability of film to push back against the establishment and forge a space for something new.

Conclusion—The Future of Film in the New Russia

The lack of meaning and permanence that was revealed upon the Soviet Union’s breakup created an opportunity for meaning to be constructed anew, exposing the contrived nature of the discourse that preceded it and opening a space for ideas of both the nation and masculine Subjectivity to emerge. This lack and the possibilities that came with it are portrayed vividly in late-Soviet and post-Soviet film, which was an industry that closely reflected the Soviet Union’s demise and the reconstruction of Russia. Yet with this lack of oversight also came increased possibilities for creating works that not only failed to adhere to requisites of the past, but which also were capable of blatantly mocking that past and forging a space for new ideas of both Russianness and masculine Subjectivity to emerge. Unlike other creative media such as literature and art, film has at its disposal a variety of discursive media that enable it to reach out to viewers, situating them within an interpretive community and engaging them in a dialogic co-construction of the film’s meaning. Through performance, identities and practices that have become
regarded as “normal,” or “natural,” can be effectively displaced and a space forged for the emergence of new alternatives.

In films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, we see primarily a mocking of the Soviet regime and a reflection of the disillusionment that permeated society and discourse at the time. The hopelessness and despair that characterized the everyday experiences of most were brought to life on the big screen, in stark contrast to the contrived idealized society of the past. Social and economic tensions were brought to life by characters who literally embodied this new and confused Russian landscape, where the so-called “demasculinization” of the empire becomes clearly etched on the bodies of men who attempt to cling to a dying past. In the award-winning Taxi Blues, the rocky transition to post-Soviet life is acted out through two male protagonists, whose physicalities become aligned with the contours of the city, as each man becomes aware of the potentialities and prohibitions of this uncharted time. The circumstances in films such as Taxi Blues are grim, pointing not toward a radiant future, but rather eulogizing the loss of a once hopeful past.

Although portrayals of post-Soviet life continue to be grim in films of the late 1990s, the construction of a new “hero of our time” in Brother revived the film industry and went a long way toward restoring masculine prowess to the once impotent Fatherland. Danila Bagrov is no saint—he kills his “enemies” in cold blood, displays overtly racist and anti-Semitic tendencies, and comes across as a bit of a womanizer. Nevertheless, he stands up for what could have been regarded at the time as quintessentially Russian values. His military service speaks to his willingness to serve his country, with his battle against the Chechens extending into his return to Moscow, then
St. Petersburg. And at the end, he is shown to be a truly benevolent and forgiving brother through his treatment of his brother Viktor, who has been thoroughly demasculinized and sent home to live with their mother. By equating violence and supremacy over women with masculinity, *Brother* undoubtedly reinforces traditional masculine stereotypes that have played out in contemporary Russia in dangerous ways. Yet this late 1990s film also served as a clear articulation of Russia’s lack, and of the ineffectiveness of capitalism and democracy to fulfill the gaping void that the end of Soviet life revealed. These themes are carried forward in the film *You I Love*, which, while maintaining its critique of capitalism and “freedom” in the new Russia, opens the space for alternative masculinities—and Ideas of Russianness—to emerge.

*You I Love* broke ground as Russia’s first film to portray openly and publically the lives and relationships of non-heterosexual characters in a relatively positive light. Through the performances of Timofei and Ulumji, we see criticisms of the post-Soviet terrain—where masculinity is equated with capitalist success, and where people who embody less than stereotypically masculine traits are presented as backward, non-authentically Russian foreigners. Vera, the only female protagonist in the film whose voice carries us into the inner recesses of both Moscow and each character’s psyche, is highly sexualized, objectified, and in the end, left to navigate circumstances that are largely beyond her control. Yet despite certain negative attributes, the film does end happily, and the men are allowed to enjoy their relationship openly. The performance of each character brings to life new possibilities for both Russianness and masculinities, forging a space that had never before been possible in Soviet, then post-Soviet discourse.
Once used almost exclusively for propagandistic purposes, genres of film in contemporary Russia are now as varied as ideas of Russianness themselves. Much like the initial “shock” reaction to, then eventual popularity of *Malen’kaia Vera*, each of these films has contributed in some way to the process of identity negotiation and formation in contemporary Russia. The previously inexpressible is now being expressed, as Russia’s vocabulary continues to grow through an amalgam of language, sound, symbolism, and performance. And in each of these films, masculinity and the relationship between the Subject and ideas of Russianness are central. The performances of male protagonists literally embody the trials and tribulations of Russian society, while simultaneously making it possible to displace established meaning and forge a space for something new to develop. As an industry that is still relatively unregulated by the state, film serves as a powerful medium for mocking, ridiculing, and poking fun at the establishment, both past and present. It will be interesting, looking into the future and across Russia’s ever-changing landscape, to watch the film industry continue to evolve as both a barometer and catalyst of change.
Figure 1: Piotr Mamonov and Piotr Zaitchenko in *Taxi Blues*, 1990

Figure 2: Sergei Bodrov Jr. as Danila Bagrov in *Brother*, 1997

Figure 3: The stereotypically “exotic” Ulumji in *You I Love*
Figure 4: Ulumji and Timofei in *You I Love*

Figure 5: Vera, Timofei, and Ulumji in *You I Love*
CONCLUSION

MASculinITY AND RUSSiANNESS IN AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Robin Hessman’s acclaimed 2010 documentary *My Perestroika*, which chronicles the lives of five classmates who came of age during the end of the Soviet period, jumps seamlessly between original footage of life under communism and the dramatic changes that came with the end of Soviet rule. During one point in the film, a flashback to the Soviet period portrays schoolchildren writing essays about their heroes, while a narrator proclaims the importance of becoming a “real human being” (*nastoiashchii chelovek*). “It is important that you decide as early as possible who you want to be your role model,” the narrator asserts. He continues: “Yes, becoming a real person is not simple, but you have great examples to follow. Our Party has brought up millions of real people. Communists—fighters for the people’s happiness.” During the Soviet period, the characteristics of the empire and the success of the communist project were directly dependent upon the dedication of people to the Soviet cause, with men and women each contributing to the collective endeavor in accordance with their “natural” abilities. The strength of the Fatherland came to be synonymous with masculine prowess, whereas the life-giving Motherland was embodied by glorious “heroine mothers.” Upon the disintegration of the Soviet regime, a quest began to not only construct a new understanding of Russianness, but also to redefine the parameters of what constituted a “real human being” in the post-Soviet period.

---

331 See film: *My Perestroika*, 2010
Upon the downfall of the Soviet regime and the displacement of the monolithic Soviet discourse that had defined social reality for more than seventy years, an omnipresent lack was revealed that created, for the first time in most people’s lives, the opportunity for a diversity of actors to assert their presence on the new Russian stage. How would Russians establish an identity, or Idea that was uniquely their own, and how would social identities and potentialities of women and men fit into this new and uncharted context? During the Soviet period, identity had been framed largely in accordance with the requisites of the Soviet project, with the signifier “communism” serving as a point de capiton, or “anchoring point,” in the construction of both collective and individual identities. In post-Soviet Russia, an amalgam of heterogeneous, yet interrelated discourses have asserted their presence, each vying for positions of hegemony in the construction of a new Russian Idea. Within such discourses, gender identities—and particularly masculinity—have become directly implicated in the (re)construction of Russianness, with the male body serving as a terrain upon which such negotiations are mapped.

Setting the stage for the moralizing principles of the church and the autocratic, centralizing tendencies of the state under Putin were Russia’s so-called “oligarchs”—the criminally inclined “businessmen” who made a fortune during Russia’s rocky transition to capitalism, and whose pampered, well-fed bodies came to be seen as embodiments of a malign capitalism and democracy. In many respects, this handful of ultra-wealthy men remapped the Russian frontier, taking Russia’s major industries under their purview, and for a short while, commanding substantial influence over Russia’s corrupt political apparatus. For their wealth and lavish lifestyles, they were envied; for their criminality,
corruption, and Western inclinations, they were seen as pillagers of the Motherland and as fundamentally non-Russian. They came to exude a masculinity that was, itself, heterotopic—directly opposing both the failed utopia of the Soviet empire and the democratic equity that many people had envisioned for Russia’s new future. The disdain that developed in Russian society over the oligarchs’ unimpeded wealth, their criminal antics, and their scandalous, Western-oriented business endeavors generated substantial support for Vladimir Putin, who would base a significant proportion of his presidential discourse on the necessity of bringing down the oligarchs and bridging the wealth disparities that had become so prevalent in the new Russia.

At the beginning of his presidency, Putin enjoyed significant popularity and support. In contrast to many Russian men, who were perceived as either über-wealthy robber barons or ineffectual drug addicts and alcoholics, Putin was strong and clean cut, measured in his actions, and had the appearance of a powerful leader who could guide Russia out of the chaotic 1990s and into a new and hopeful future. Through both his policies and his hyper-masculinized persona, Putin became, for many people, Russia’s Ideal man. He resurrected national holidays and celebrations, glorified the Russian language against all others, and came out in strong support of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is viewed by many citizens as representing the foundation of Russianness. Throughout most of Putin’s tenure in office, his approval rating has hovered between 60-80 percent. He has been particularly popular among lower income Russians and youth, who saw in his persona the strength and unity that Russians lacked. Yet through his centralizing and autocratic political endeavors, and by mythologizing the past in his construction of a future Ideal, Putin has etched out a very particular image of what not
only Russia, but also the citizens who reside within its boarders, should be. Women are now compensated monetarily for producing multiple offspring, while men are encouraged to be strong in body and spirit—brave and courageous defenders of the fatherland, and unwaveringly heterosexual.

The Orthodox Church has gone a long way in supporting the return of “traditional” gender identities and sexualities as central to the revival of Russia itself. It has called for a return of “spiritual-morality” to everyday life, and particularly to the lives of men, as evidenced by the church’s recent foray into the Russian Armed Forces. According to prominent representatives of the church, it was the sinfulfulness and waywardness of the people that led to the maladies of the post-Soviet context—maladies ranging from illness, to Russia’s population decline, to fires that raged across Russia in the summer of 2010. The only way out of such conundrums is to return to Russia’s roots—Orthodox Christianity—and the practices that go along with it. These practices primarily involve care of the self and dedication to family, which are defined in highly gendered terms. “Normal” gender identities and sexualities are regarded as essential and given by god. Any derivation from what the church stipulates as constituting essential masculinity or femininity is viewed as sin, and as detrimental to the future survival of Russia itself. Yet despite this emphasis on the revival of traditional church practices, it is apparent that most people regard the church as a marker of identity than as a true spiritual guide. As stated in previous chapters, church affiliation has at times been estimated at around 80 percent of the Russian population. Yet a much smaller proportion of the population reports actually attending church or engaging in church rituals. The church for them stands in as a fulfillment of the void that was revealed upon the displacement of
communist ideology, providing a stable (and historical) identity with which they can connect. This connection, alone, has been enough to propel the church to great popularity in Russian culture and politics, where its conservative tenets have borne consequential legal sanctions for men and women alike.

Despite the centripetalizing and authoritative discourses of the church and state, which have served to define both normal masculine Subjectivity and Russianness in unyielding and essentialist terms, voices have emerged in post-Soviet society that have attempted to contradict the status quo and forge a space for something new. Authors such as Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin, as well as artists whose work has been deemed “pornographic,” “anti-religious,” or otherwise objectionable, have spoken out prominently against both the absurdities and injustices of both Soviet and post-Soviet life. Coupled with prominent film productions of the 1990s and early 2000s, such works have used gender and sexuality, particularly through performance and representations of the body, to mock discourses that had otherwise become hegemonic and unquestioned, while making room for new alternatives to emerge. Within such works, we see an onslaught of diverse gender identities and sexualities, which become aligned with symbols of Russianness in a way that enables them to signify Russian identity in all its complexity.

As of March 2012, Vladimir Putin is facing stiff opposition in the major cities. The same citizens who largely prospered from his economic and political initiatives are now protesting the corruption and cronyism that persists in Russia, oftentimes calling for Putin’s ouster and demanding a more open and democratic electoral process. According to Levada Polls, however, his approval rating officially is high, at about 60 percent. This
“support” is oftentimes most prominent in Russia’s outskirts, where living conditions, although still somewhat bleak, have stabilized from the tumultuous 1990s. And it oftentimes arises out of a lack of other viable alternatives. As Lyudmila Kisilyova, a 60-year-old pensioner, told the New York Times when she was asked what would happen if Putin lost the election:

We will stay in one place or return to the old, terrifying days of the 1990s. There is a huge difference today in comparison with those days. There was no work, there was nothing. The stores were empty, and it was a terrifying time to live. I can’t say that everything is great today: Pensions are small, and we’re scared about the future of our children,” she said. “But life is better than in the 1990s."

This sense of security, which many people believe to be a direct result of Putin and his policies as President, then Prime Minister, have inspired an otherwise indifferent electorate to show up at the polls and cast their vote once again for Russia’s seemingly omnipotent leader. Associates of Putin may be stuffing ballot boxes, but citizens who understand their stability and livelihood to depend upon Putin’s incumbency are also implicit in perpetuating his rule. In the same New York Times article, it was reported that a woman named Olga Klubnichkina, who is the director of a technical school in Lyubertsy, was recorded threatening her staff with “disciplinary measures if they failed to bring in 11 absentee ballots marked for Putin—their own and 10 from friends and family.”

She was recorded saying: “I think that all understand that our future depends


333 Ibid.
on this…We need to submit to one commander in chief, like in the army. Someone commands, and like soldiers we follow.”

Having won the 2012 presidential election with just over 60 percent of the vote, Putin will embark on a third and extended term as Russia’s president, and Dmitri Medvedev will continue to be his puppet as prime minister. Yet this term may be different. As evidenced by the protests of late, and by the obviously staged nature of Putin’s most recent antics, people who once genuinely supported him are now beginning to waver. His party, United Russia, seems to be suffering the biggest loss of popularity. But it is clear that Putin himself will need to redefine himself, his party, and his third term in office if he intends on restoring and maintaining his image as Russia’s Ideal man. In any case, the ways in which Putin and other prominent actors articulate the nation and people’s places in it will be of supreme importance.

“Russia,” as Winston Churchill once famously remarked, “is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” For centuries, Russia has endured tumultuous strife, fearful invasions, and glorious victories. Its borders have been redrawn, the will of its people tested, and its history rewritten. All the while, questions of what it means to be Russian have persistently bubbled to the surface—as if it might be possible to pin down a dogmatic and unchanging signifier of Russianness that is distinct from the everyday practices, beliefs and discourse of an ever-changing populace. And at every turn, gender identities have become implicated in Ideas of what it means to be Russian, with masculinity taking center stage. As Russia sketches out another chapter of its future, the lives, potentialities, and prohibitions of its citizens are critically at stake. ~Fin~

334 Ibid.
Bibliography


Oushakine, Serguei Alex. “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia.” *Russian Review* 66 (2007): 451-482.


“Putin Praises Orthodox Church.” Reuters, June 9, 2000.


Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarchal Appeal Concerning the Drought and Forest Fires in Russia. 2010.

———. Patriarchal Appeal Concerning the Drought and Forest Fires in Russia. 2010.


*Takogo Kak Putin*. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OFOPd6pgjI.


