

## *The Post-Soviet Is Over: On Reading the Ruins*

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В общем, жили мы неплохо.  
Но закончилась эпоха.  
Шьшел-мышел, вышел вон!  
Наступил иной эон.  
В предвкушении конца  
Ламца-дрица гоп цаца!

—**Timur Kibirov, 1998**<sup>1</sup>

Крушение Советского Союза было крупнейшей геополитической катастрофой века. Для российского же народа оно стало настоящей драмой. Десятки миллионов наших сограждан и соотечественников оказались за пределами российской территории. Эпидемия распада к тому же перекинулась на саму Россию. [...] Накопления граждан были обесценены, старые идеалы разрушены.

—**Vladimir Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly, April 25, 2005**<sup>2</sup>

We lived OK, we got along.  
Then came the end of the eon.  
Out, they say, goes Y-O-U!  
And here's another day's debut.  
The end, you know, is coming soon.  
Wop-bob-a-loo-bop a wop-bam-boom!

The destruction of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people this was a true drama. Tens of millions of our compatriots and fellow citizens found themselves beyond the borders of Russian territory. And the epidemic of collapse afflicted Russia itself. [...] The savings of citizens were rendered worthless and old ideals were destroyed.

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<sup>1</sup> Timur Kibirov, *V obshchem, zhili my neplokho... [We Lived OK, We Got Along]*, in *Kto kuda, a ia v Rossiiu [Everyone's Going Somewhere, but I'm Heading for Russia]* (Moscow: Vremia, 2001), 367. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.



Идеалы убежали [...]

—Timur Kibirov, 2006<sup>3</sup>

Ей же Богу,  
 Я готов смириться  
 Со многим.  
 Почти со всем.  
 [...]
   
 Но только не с тем,  
 Что Владимир Владимирович Путин—  
 Это Николай Павлович Первый.  
 И что Шендерович–Иртенъев—  
 Это Чаадаев сегодня!

—Timur Kibirov, 2006<sup>4</sup>

The ideals have run away [...]

By God,  
 I am prepared to swallow  
 A lot.  
 Almost anything.  
 [...]
   
 Just not:  
 That Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin  
 Is Tsar Nikolai Pavlovich the First.  
 And that Shenderovich-Irten'ev  
 Is the Chaadaev of today!

IN THE WAKE OF THE RUSSO-GEORGIAN CONFLICT OF THE SUMMER OF 2008, during which the profound differences between Russian and Western views of world affairs became abundantly clear, not to mention the autumn financial meltdowns and the more recent efforts to “reset” international relations, there is at least one thing on which pundits and politicians inside and outside of Russia seem to agree: the post-Soviet era, such as it was, is now emphatically over. This common wisdom would appear simply to recognize the obvious: over the past decade Russia has reemerged as an economic and military hegemon and Russians have been reborn as the self-confident representatives of an established social and political order. Yet this commonplace announcement of epochal turnover leads to the more obscure question that I am concerned with in this essay: what next? To be more precise, what are the political, theoretical and aesthetic implications of the end of the epoch initiated by the breakup of the Soviet Union? My discussion is concerned primarily with the Russian case, although I offer some commentary on the larger region as well, and while my approach is primarily that of discursive and poetic analysis, my conclusions relate to the structure of the politico-historical field as a whole. However, I will begin with a necessary prelude to discussion of the “post-post-Soviet” present—a reconsideration of what appears now (in retrospect) as a somewhat confused field of inquiry: the nature of the post-Soviet era itself.

### THE POST-SOVIET

First of all, think back from the vantage point of our present sense of epochal change to the “historical consciousness” of a prior threshold moment—the inception of the post-Soviet era. If there was one instantly recognizable image of the revolutions of 1989–1991 and the breakup of the Soviet Union, it was the cast-down statues of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, etc. In the years around the

<sup>2</sup> “Poslanie Federalnomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii” [Memorandum to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], April 25, 2005, available online on the official website of the Russian President, <http://www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/04/87049.shtml> (accessed May 18, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Timur Kibirov, *Kara-baras!* (Moscow: Vremia, 2006), 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34. I. M. Irten'ev is a highly successful contemporary poet, who has built his career around careful deployment of the ironic tropes of postmodern and conceptualist writing in commentary on public affairs. V. A. Shenderovich, his frequent collaborator, is a comic and political humorist, formerly a writer for the highly successful television political satire *Kukl* [Puppets] (the now-banned Russian version of the puppet-based English political satire *Spitting Image*).

collapse of one-party rule, first of Eastern-European communist regimes and then of the USSR, a number of monuments throughout the region were either toppled through mass actions (maximal iconicity, but really only a few cases), or removed from their pedestals by the decisions of governing bodies. In Russia itself this was in actuality a statistically marginal phenomenon, primarily relevant in Moscow and in other political centers—many more Soviet monuments remained standing than came down, especially in the outlying regions of cityscapes and the Russian hinterlands. I will return to the fictive or mythic quality of images of falling and fallen Soviet statuary below. First, however, consider the “(de)face value” of such images in the early to middle 1990s, when they were a potent icon of the times—frequently used, for instance, as cover art for books on post-Soviet affairs such as *London Financial Times* correspondent Chrystia Freeland’s *Sale of the Century*.<sup>5</sup> Nothing, it seemed, could illustrate more forcefully the commonly accepted contours of that historical moment.<sup>6</sup> An era had come to a clear-cut conclusion in 1991, leaving in its wake ruins that bespoke the obsolescence of the ideological, social, and political norms that had supported Soviet civilization in the USSR and the Eastern Bloc for generations. By the standard accounts of the day, attested in an endless series of books, articles, and pronouncements of politicians and talking heads, this epochal threshold, with its falling monuments, had inaugurated a “period of transition” that was to last for some unpredictable number of years, ushering in a new era of global integration and “free-market democracy” and returning Russia to a “common European home”—to recall a much cited catch-phrase of Andranik Migranian, one of the most prominent official theorists of the final spasms of the Bolshevik regime.<sup>7</sup>

In subsequent years, this prognosis was in some ways realized in a number of the new and reinvented Balkan and Eastern European states, albeit in an uneven, heterogeneous and unpredictable manner. In contrast, by the late 1990s Russia itself was witnessing a fading of optimism concerning any clearly defined, near-at-hand goals for social transformation. With regard to the global arena, earlier visions of complete reconciliation with Western states and adaptation to their social and economic norms and geopolitical priorities had faded in the face of opportunistic incursions of Western firms in Russia, NATO expansion and diplomatic conflicts over Kosovo, and other matters. Regarding social experience within Russia, Serguei Oushakine has proposed (on the basis of interviews he conducted in Siberia in 1997) that economic stagnation and the failure of any quick transformation of Soviet institutions in Russia led by the second half of the 1990s to a “post-Soviet aphasia,” characterized by a “loss of a metalanguage and thus the loss of the ability to ‘dissect’ the metaphor of the ‘post-Soviet.’”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, given these significant local variations, conceptions of present social experience and subjectivity as characterized by a “post-socialist” or “post-Soviet” moment or condition remained throughout

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<sup>5</sup> Chrystia Freeland, *Sale of the Century: Russia’s Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism* (New York: Crown Business, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> As anthropologist Maya Nadkarni has written, “images of toppled monuments and headless statues of Lenin dominated the imaginations of both the former Soviet bloc states and their Western observers, as materializing the historical break represented by the political transformations.” Maya Nadkarni, “The Death of Socialism and the Afterlife of Its Monuments: Making and Marketing the Past in Budapest’s Statue Park Museum,” in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London: Routledge, 2003), 196.

<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Stavrakis, “Gorbachev’s ‘Common European Home’ and the Politics of Reform,” in *The USSR and the World Economy: Challenges for the Global Integration of Soviet Markets under Perestroika*, ed. Deborah Anne Palmieri (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 74–104.

<sup>8</sup> Serguei Oushakine, “In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 6 (2000): 991–1016.

Eastern Europe and the former Soviet region up to the end of the 1990s as a shared historical horizon—even if this horizon was hazier in some places than in others.

Now, in order to inject a degree of analytic clarity into this picture, it is essential to recognize that the revolutionary termination of the Soviet epoch and inauguration of a new era—whether by means of a momentary leap into the future, an extended passage through a period of “hybridity,” or overlap of incommensurate social worlds, or even through a less definite period of incoherent post-Soviet civilizational “hangover” as in Oushakine’s proposal—was always as much of an ideological fiction as is any proclaimed revolution in human history. Beyond the strictly political-institutional sphere, revolution, transition, or transformation (in the sense of an overthrow of the existing social order and replacement of it by something qualitatively different) can only be metaphors that mask inevitable continuities of social organization, practical life, and everyday experience—basal linkages that persist through even the most radical moments of social change. To consider the other side of this coin, “stability” in historical epochs is also nothing more than a metaphor, masking the ways in which human societies are always shot through, at every moment, by change and discontinuity. In this connection, attempts like Oushakine’s to define the post-Soviet or post-Socialist era as characterized by an “aphasia” resulting from the “hybridity” or overlap of the incommensurate norms, languages, identities, or ideologies of the Soviet past and those of a qualitatively different, impending future will always come up short in their attempts to differentiate in any absolute manner this state of affairs from any other moment in modern history. Modern societies and subjectivities are always to some extent adulterated and incoherent, balanced between multiple norms, languages and ideologies, divergent yet interconnected pasts and futures. Note that Oushakine’s informants in his study were students—individuals who, poised on the edge of adulthood, have a special sense of vertigo before the challenge and, for some, impossibility of mastering the many different codes and social identities that they must learn to inhabit simultaneously.

This is not to deny the usefulness of such theoretical models as “aphasia,” “hybridity,” or “liminality” for the comprehension of some aspects of the post-Soviet or post-socialist condition. Yet the implication in such terms that this condition is an abnormal one that consists primarily in a widespread subjective experience of symbolic impotence tends to mask the persistence of semiotic complexity in modern social life as a normal state of affairs, as well as the possibility that historically specific configurations of such social complexity can present symbolic advantages and opportunities to certain subjects, while disadvantaging others, depending on social and economic positioning—on class, age, gender, etc. The uneven field of competition over the symbolic and real fruits of the post-Soviet becomes visible, for instance, in Alexei Yurchak’s nuanced analysis of the naming of Russian businesses during the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> It may well be that the complexity characteristic of modern subjectivity is heightened during periods of rapid, politically engineered social change. However, at a more theoretically coherent level the specificity of the post-socialist condition relates not only, or not in an unmediated fashion, to this exaggerated social complexity, but more directly to the characteristic hope, commonly shared but realized only with varying success, that a particular, interrelated set of historical categories for social experience and subjectivity such as “revolution,” “transition,” “post-socialist,” “Soviet,” “post-Soviet,” “New Russian,” “stability,” “incoherence,” and so on (up to “hybridity” and “aphasia” themselves), provide instruments by which to master such complexity. These are all, equally, meta-

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<sup>9</sup> Alexei Yurchak, “Privatize Your Name: Symbolic Work in a Post-Soviet Linguistic Market,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4, no. 3 (2000): 406–34.

phorical pathways towards a cognitive reduction of socially embedded semiotic complexity, steeped in diverse ideological implications, which all fall short of capturing to the fullest any given social situation or subjecthood. These historico-metaphorical constructs were typical markers of the social and political meaning-producing strategies of the post-socialist territories of the 1990s, wielded by some with great success to generate cognitive coherence as well as political and economic profit, and by others with less success. The “post-socialist,” in this sense, was a shared discursive mechanism that allowed, in its structured metaphors of history, a special apprehension of fundamental conditions that are always to some degree pertinent in modern social life, offering, for some, a high degree of cognitive mastery of social complexity and, for others, an exaggerated and historically identified experience of acute loss and anomie.

Furthermore, the phantasmatic nature of the painful social rebirth imagined under the rubrics “post-socialist” and “post-Soviet” was never a secret: this was an ideological repressed that frequently returned. From the very inception of the post-Soviet era, the standard story of the alchemical transmutation of the social past into a different and definite future was subject to critique and interrogation across the relevant territories. On one hand, post-Soviet nostalgia in its various local instantiations (*yugonostalgia*, *ostalgie*) has been seen by some as an expression or symptom of the actual affective, social, and cultural legacies of the Soviet era, and by others as a mode of critique of the economic and social inequities perpetrated by the “shock” of social transformation.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, a significant number of literary and artistic works of the early post-Soviet period offered meditations on the social and political actuality of a moment when the future was supposed to supercede the past in an explosion of social transformation, yet which was plagued by the continuities and resistances of human social experience (in this, they continued a tradition of critique of earlier moments of “revolutionary” transformation in Russia). One common technique of the literature and other cultural production of this era was the splicing together of supposedly antithetical elements of the “Soviet” and “post-Soviet” worlds into shocking, monstrous formations that allowed a reexamination of their subterranean points of contact—a strategy that I dubbed the “revolutionary grotesque” at the time. As Timur Kibirov, a master of this strategy, presented the era of Soviet collapse in his 1990 epistle to Sergei Gandlevskii “About Certain Aspects of the Current Sociocultural Situation” (“О некоторых аспектах нынешней социокультурной ситуации”):

Там, где сияло раньше «Слава  
КПСС», там «Кока-Кола»  
Горит над хмурою державой,  
Над дискотекой развеселой.

There, where once glowed “Glory  
To the CPSU,” “Coca-Cola”  
Now glitters above the sullen state,  
Above a merry discotheque.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Kibirov’s stitched-together, Frankensteinian image of a historical moment delivers both shock at radical ideological transformation and a recognition of social and economic power’s curious persistence in the structure of the cityscape. The myth of radical revolution faces off with the countervailing actuality of continuity. Both of these modes, nostalgia and grotesque, were

<sup>10</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49–55; Serguei Oushakine, “We’re Nostalgic But We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia,” *Russian Review* 66, no. 3 (2007): 451–82

<sup>11</sup> Timur Kibirov, *Serezhe Gandlevskomu. O nekotorykh aspektakh nyneshnei sotsiokul’turnoj situatsii* [To Serezhe Gandlevskii: About Certain Aspects of the Present Sociocultural Situation]. This lengthy poem was first published in *Sintaksis* 29 (1990): 183–89. I reproduce here the translation published with my more extensive analysis of the work in Kevin M. F. Platt, *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 171–86.

means of processing ostensibly “impossible” (yet quite real) conjunctions and confusions of what was thought to be an outworn past and a dawning future, proclaimed as incompatible and irreconcilable poles of experience and history, and of investigating the ideological function of the myth of social rebirth—what it concealed and licensed.

### THE POST-POST-SOVIET

Let me turn now to the question with which I began this essay: what are the implications of the end of the post-Soviet era? First of all, let us recognize that this new epoch, like the post-Soviet before it, is a metaphorical construct. Which is not to dispute the fact that “a new era has begun,” but to recast the meaning of such a pronouncement. The end of the post-Soviet era does not mean that the social or institutional remains of the USSR or the decade that followed its breakup have somehow disappeared, that “transition” is in fact over, or that the clock has been turned back and a “new cold war” is upon us. Rather, the common apprehension of a new epoch means simply that the typical post-Soviet discursive mechanisms described above have lost their dominance in the social construction of historical process and social identity, yielding their place to other visions of present situatedness. Whereas authoritative visions of history and identity during the 1990s were predicated on the notion that 1991 marked a moment of radical social transformation, erasing geopolitical divisions between Russia and the west, the “end of the post-Soviet” is the culmination of a gradual reemergence over the last decade or so of a vision of political history and social identity based in continuities, at various historical depths, linking the Russian present with the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras, coupled with the reappearance of particularist ideologies that set Russia in explicit opposition to Western states, social norms, and geopolitical interests. These are the new discursive mechanisms—to be sure, no less ideologically compromised than the ones they have largely replaced in their projection of absolute temporal and geopolitical distinctions in a world that knows no absolutes—offered by dominant political rhetoric and public discourse for the reduction of social complexity and the construction of present identity in Russia. Their present dominance of the social discursive field, rather than any of the political or historical realities that they ostensibly refer to, is the particularity of the present new era in Russia.

I’d like to stress that my redefinition of epochal markers based on a self-reflexive, discursive principle (the meaning of terms such as “post-soviet” and “new era” is at base the social consensus concerning their meaning) refers to the dominance and social authority of specific standard stories of social experience, rather than to any conception of their all-pervasiveness. As I suggest above, construction of identity and action in terms of a perception of continuity with the Soviet era was always one of the possible settings on the politico-historical dial of the 1990s, but in those days only as a mode of resistance to the conceptions of ascendant reformers and New Russians, who were invested both politically and economically in the dominant metaphor of the post-Soviet. Indeed, apprehensions of the political significance and social reality of historical continuity underlay both the rhetoric of the communist opposition of the 1990s and the critique of the idea of revolutionary transformation inherent in works of the revolutionary grotesque, such as the poem by Kibirov that I cite above, although such apprehensions held opposed political values for those rather distinct actors. In present-day Russia, however, the pendulum has swung violently to the other extreme, rendering visions of political and institutional continuity the dominant discursive tool in constructions of recent history and social identity. The current leadership’s efforts to inculcate a new view of history have been most obvious in its policies to-

wards education, which brought a new generation of patriotic and apologetic textbooks to Russian children in recent years. As Putin explained at a meeting with history educators in 2003: “Contemporary textbooks for schools and institutions of higher education must not become a stage for new political and ideological battles. The facts of history should be related in these textbooks. They should foster a sense of pride in one’s history, in one’s country.”<sup>12</sup> As commentators have noted over recent years, the reinvigorated conception among Russia’s current leadership of the ties between present and past is evident in a variety of policy measures, ranging from the renationalization of major industries, the de-facto normalization of a political system reminiscent of democratic centralism (a “one-and-a-half-party state” of “sovereign democracy”), the hobbling of NGOs seeking to develop civil society cut to a Western pattern, and a host of other measures culminating in the reassertion of Russian military dominance over its sphere of influence last summer.<sup>13</sup> The discursive cornerstone of all of these policies has been Russian distinctiveness and historical continuity with the Soviet era. As Putin expressed his views of the politico-historical scene in his 2007 Memorandum to the Federal Assembly (the Russian equivalent of the US State of the Union speech), “I am convinced that our society is capable of undertaking and resolving grand national tasks when it possesses a common system of moral landmarks—when we promote respect for our native language, for distinctive cultural values, for the memory of our ancestors, and for every page of the history of the fatherland.”<sup>14</sup>

The rehabilitation in present day Russia of this seamless vision of political and social history grew from the seeds of play with images of the Imperial era by “reformist” elites in the 1990s, who turned quickly from the thought that earlier Russian episodes of political pluralism such as the Imperial State Duma might serve as precedents for political life in the new Russia to toy with the grandiloquent monikers (“Boris the First”) and pageantry of the tsars—the fuss over the reburial of Nicholas II in 1998 is a telling example.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet victory in WWII, of course, never lost its significance as a positive source of national pride, no matter the condition of Russian society at the time of that triumph. But by the new century, the game with history and memory had blossomed into a vision of the past, broadly shared among Russian elites, that is best described as an aestheticization of the genealogy of power.<sup>16</sup> From Putin’s official renovation of a mix of Soviet and Imperial symbols of state to the many memorialization and reconstruction projects of

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<sup>12</sup> “Putin: shkol’nye uchebniki—ne ploshchadka dlia politicheskoi bor’by, s istorii ‘nada sniat’ vse shelukhu i penu” [“Putin: School Textbooks Are Not a Platform for Political Battles; ‘We Must Remove All the Husks and Froth’ from History”], November 27, 2003, <http://www.newsru.com> (accessed August 24, 2007). See also press concerning a new handbook for history teachers published with Putin’s explicit approval in 2007: A. V. Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii, 1945–2006* (Modern Russian History, 1945–2006) (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2007). The book adopts a largely apologetic approach to the history of Stalinism. On the involvement of the Putin administration in this work’s composition, see Anna Kachurovskaia, “Istoricheskii pripadok” [A Historical Paroxysm], *Vlast’* 27 (July 2007), <http://www.kommersant.ru> (accessed August 24, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “Russia: Authoritarianism Without Authority,” *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 1 (2006): 104–18; Sarah Elizabeth Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, “Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization,” *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2005–6): 83–96.

<sup>14</sup> “Poslanie Federal’nomu sobraniuu Rossiiskoi federatsii” [Memorandum to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], April 26, 2007, Official Website of the Russian President, [http://kremlin.ru/appears/2007/04/26/1156\\_type63372type63374type82634\\_125339.shtml](http://kremlin.ru/appears/2007/04/26/1156_type63372type63374type82634_125339.shtml) (accessed April 4, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> On Russian political counter-traditions of pragmatism and pluralism, see Boris M. Ponomarev, “Historical Culture,” in *Russian Culture at the Crossroads: Paradoxes of Postcommunist Consciousness*, ed. Dimitri N. Shalin (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996): 11–40.

<sup>16</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 83–119.

contemporary Moscow (stretching from the grand and tasteless: the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the Resurrection Gates to Red Square, the Victory Park WWII memorial<sup>17</sup>—to the absurd and tasty: Petrovich Restaurant, the Pushkin Cafe), the historical projects of Russia's present privileged class in general reflect, in the words of Andreas Schönle, "a desire to repress the ruin value of history," which is obscured under "a sanitized pseudo-history, a glossy remake that suggests the present's association with unchanging mythical grandeur"<sup>18</sup> and that often carries out a cynical commodification of the past. Matching this complacent pride and profit in the gilded pomp of past Russian aristocracies, no matter what ideology or program they served, no matter what mayhem they wrought on the Russian masses, the masses themselves have been drawn more and more in recent years to figures of political authority and national greatness. In this regard, the recent internet and television project "The Name of Russia", in which Russians were able to vote for the "most significant, notable and symbolic personalities of Russian history", is telling: the five most popular figures in the final rating were (in order): medieval prince Aleksandr Nevskii, late Imperial prime minister P. A. Stolypin, Joseph Stalin, national poet A. S. Pushkin, and Peter the Great.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the dominance in the "new era," of discursive constructions of present experience based on historical continuity with the Russian and Soviet past and political and cultural distinction from the West, and of policies and social identities derived from them, is evident as well in their resonance across the range of political orientations today. Although less remarked upon in Western commentary on Russia, ardent critics of the present political leadership in Russia have begun at times to adopt similar discursive mechanisms, demanding a return to innately Russian spiritual values and the political legacy of the Soviet years as the proper path to the achievement of universal justice—a turn of events that has produced a remarkable reconfiguration of the political map, in which the fear of a decade past among "liberal reformers" of the "red-brown" coalition of nationalists and communists has given way to the demand for (and fear of) a red-liberal coalition that might generate some kind of viable opposition to the current national-authoritarian party of power.<sup>20</sup> In addition to telling examples of this emergent political alignment such as Garry Kasparov and Eduard Limonov's unified opposition organization Other Russia, as well as the energetic outreach of the only truly viable oppositional party, that of the communists, towards disillusioned liberals, this new position has perhaps most lucidly and forcefully been enunciated by none other than the former oligarch and now "private citizen" Mikhail Khodorkovskii.<sup>21</sup> (Note that the red-brown rapprochement of the 1990s was a typical "hybrid" phenomenon of the transitional period, linking the extreme ends of the political spectrum to the right and left, in a peculiar alliance made possible by the 1989–1991 historical divide that ren-

<sup>17</sup> Nurit Schleifman, "Moscow's Victory Park: A Monumental Change," *History and Memory* 13, no. 2 (2001): 5–34.

<sup>18</sup> Andreas Schönle, "Ruins and History: Observations on Russian Approaches to Destruction and Decay," *Slavic Review* 65, no. 4 (2006): 668.

<sup>19</sup> See the results of the project at "Imia Rossii" [The Name of Russia], <http://www.nameofrussia.ru> (accessed March 26, 2009). For the description of the project cited in my text, see "O proekte," <http://www.nameofrussia.ru/about.html> (accessed March 24, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas F. Remington, "Prospects for a Democratic Left in Postcommunist Russia," *Journal of Policy History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 130–48.

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail Khodorkovskii, "Levyi povorot" [A Turn to the Left], *Vedomosti*, August 1, 2005, <http://www.vedomosti.ru> (accessed May 18, 2007); Mikhail Khodorkovskii, "Levyi povorot-2" [A Turn to the Left, Number 2], *Kommersant*, November 11, 2005, <http://www.kommersant.ru> (accessed May 16, 2007). Available in translation at <http://www.khodorkovsky.info/statements/> (accessed May 16, 2007).

dered far left politics paradoxically reactionary; in distinction, today's potential liberal-left alliance would be a far more "natural" coalition of progressive neighbors on a conventional political spectrum.)

In the new politics of history, the 1990s have widely come to be seen as a period of disturbing and anomalous chaos that is now past, yet the results of which necessitate concerted efforts at damage control in the present. In effect, while the 1990s were concerned with the amelioration of the Soviet legacy, the Putin administration was from its inception oriented on the amelioration of the legacy of the 1990s—by means of the recentralization of power, the bankrupting and criminal prosecution of Khodorkovskii, the reassertion of state control over the mass media, etc. In Putin's words: "We have worked tirelessly to overcome the difficult consequences of the transitional period, in order to manage the costs of a profound and by no means unequivocal transformation."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the most common historical analogy coming to be applied to the 1990s is that of the "Time of Troubles"—the catastrophic inter-dynastic period of the early seventeenth century that preceded the foundation of the Romanov dynasty. As used in public discourse of the past several years, this analogy acts to recode Soviet ruins, which in the 1990s signified a wholesale civilizational turnover, into the markers of a temporal island of atypical disorder, an island that is now receding into the safe distance. (Of course, it is yet to be seen if the destabilizing effects of the current economic crisis will deprive this most recent historical revision of its potency by transforming the Putin years into an atypical island of order sandwiched between two periods of social chaos.) The implications of the historical analogy extend to foreign relations as well: the Time of Troubles was punctuated by attempts to subject Russia to foreign rule, and concluded with a legendary national mobilization and election of the first Romanov tsar Mikhail Fedorovich. In this new historical optic, the fallen monuments that signaled civilizational turnover during the 1990s have been recast as a regrettable mess that contemporary society must overcome or "look past" in order to reconnect with the course of Russian history, the origins of collective identity and Russia's tendency towards potent serial autocracies.<sup>23</sup> In sum, then, the hallmarks of the end of the post-Soviet era in Russia are the reappropriation of Soviet history as Russian history, the reinscription of Russian territory as non-Western space and the revision of the 1990s from a period of transition to one of anomalous social disorder, enabling a realignment of political affiliations in a continuum that no longer stacks up all programs and causes against the epochal threshold of the Soviet collapse and that often substitutes for this semiotic distinction the geographical border with the west. In effect, the absolute epochal border of 1991 has been effaced.

Now, despite the fact that Russia appears largely unique in its realignment of the politics of history and memory, related conclusions concerning the end of the post-Soviet era are relevant for much of the rest of the former territory of the USSR, the Warsaw Pact, and the Balkans. For all of these regions, post-socialist "transition," "hybridity," and so on are increasingly perceived as belonging to the past—although a corollary of this observation is that the divergence of the

<sup>22</sup> "Poslanie Federal'nomu sobraniuu Rossiiskoi federatsii" [Memorandum to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], April 26, 2007, Official Website of the Russian President, [http://kremlin.ru/appears/2007/04/26/1156\\_type63372type63374type82634\\_125339.shtml](http://kremlin.ru/appears/2007/04/26/1156_type63372type63374type82634_125339.shtml) (accessed April 4, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Irina Davydova, "Smutnoe desiatiletie" [A Decade of Troubles], *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 20, no. 6 (2001): <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/> (accessed April 4, 2009); Galina Zvereva, "'1990-e kak katastrofa': diskursnyi analiz tekstov sovremennoi rossiiskoi publitsistiki i istoriografii" [The 1990s as a Catastrophe: A Discourse Analysis of Texts of Contemporary Russian Publicistics and Historiography] (paper presented at the XV Bannye chteniia [Bathhouse Readings], Moscow, March 2007).

historical experience of the various societies and polities that occupy the region has progressed to the point that no one discursive lens, such as that of the “post-socialist,” can be applied in an even manner to their very different present realities and constructions of the politico-historical landscape. In what used to be “the former Yugoslavia”—now simply Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, etc.—the metaphorical dividing line of the “beginning of now” is the cessation of armed conflict, while in much of Eastern and Central Europe—regions quickly or slowly becoming (unmarked elements of) Europe—the sense of a new historical horizon of expectations is linked to the successive waves of accession to EU membership or to the settled orientation towards it. The broadly shared conceptions of historical hybridity characteristic of the post-socialist era are being replaced by other discursive tools across the region, but in a local manner. In Ukraine, the once operative metaphor of historical transition is coming to be replaced by a geographical trope that positions Ukraine in a middle space between Western Europe and a resurgent Russia. In the Baltic States, as I imagine is the case throughout much of Central and Eastern Europe, the sense of hybridity of place and institutions, past and future, that marked the 1990s is fading as a result of the progressive successes of efforts to ameliorate Soviet institutions and integrate markets and social realities into those of Europe. Even given the heightened tensions between old and new Europe brought on by the financial crises, the fundamental European identity of these regions has acquired a feeling of finality and incontrovertibility. One gets the sense that while the socialist period will always be a part of the history of these places, it is coming to be seen as a truly closed book—and a book that by virtue of its association with an increasingly belligerent Russian neighbor is strangely alien or anomalous with regard to present collective identity. While that era certainly shaped these states and societies, it belongs not to the present, but to the past. Perhaps we should put it (as many do in these territories): the socialist era belongs not to these societies, but rather to a Russian occupier or colonizer. If there is a common denominator of historical discourse in the region, it is that, in distinction from the Russian case, epochal discontinuity has remained the dominant trope, although “transition” is ending—not as an actuality, of course, but as a key discursive mechanism of social and political identity.

Of course, the continued rejection of the socialist past and of imperial Soviet occupiers as alien impositions in these spaces falls as short of accounting for actualities of investment, complicity, and social and political continuity in these territories as did rejection of the Soviet past during the 1990s in Russia itself. Adding complexity to the discursive policing of clean epochal borders in places like Latvia is the elision in this social and political vision of the sizable populations of ethnic Russians “stranded” in Europe when the Soviet borders collapsed, many of whom continue to view the Soviet past and geopolitical integration with Moscow as objects of desire. The fuzzy temporal and geographical borders represented by these populations and their alternate constructions of history are the repressed of the sharp historical distinctions dominating public discourse in the societies of the new Europe. As a result of the absolute and increasingly settled distancing of the socialist past, coupled with the bad consciousness of the fictive qualities of this construction of history, these societies are witness to continuing efforts to expose and deracinate the remains of Soviet-era social institutions (most recently hitting front pages with the revelations concerning the complicity of priests with security services in Poland or the furor over the removal of the Soviet era WWII monument in Estonia). Yet while one may anticipate that such scandalous public scenes of exhumation and reburial of socialist skeletons will continue at least until the last socialist generation fades from public life, they will take place against a background of increasing normalization of a common European quotidian order. One may fore-

see a near future in which the traces of the socialist era in Riga or Tallinn, for instance, will largely be a meaningless white noise (more and more occasionally punctuated by “shocking” reminders of “stubborn legacies”), in a society that is felt to be and aspires to be no different from any other part of the post-industrial West.

### TIMUR KIBIROV AND CRITIQUE OF THE NEW

The politico-historical discursive situation in Russia stands in stark contrast to this common Eastern European incremental normalization of epochal rupture, and critique must therefore concentrate on a different set of ideological blind spots and ellipses. In order to plumb the critical possibilities presented by this new situation, let’s turn now to analysis of a specific recent text dealing with history and memory—a more recent work of the Moscow poet Timur Kibirov. As noted with the example above, during the early 1990s Kibirov was a master both of the grotesque and of a calculated nostalgia—mechanisms that presented a contrarian view of basal historical and social continuities as an instrument for the critique of that era’s standard story of post-Soviet transformation. Yet his more recent writing has enunciated what I propose to view as symptomatic of the breakdown of those aesthetic possibilities and the rise of a new mode of contestation. In a moment in which public discourse is emphasizing historical continuity as the basis for a renovated political and social order, Kibirov, perhaps surprisingly, has not simply overturned his earlier formula of resistance in order to dwell on historical rupture instead. Rather, he has articulated an alternative conception of social continuity that offers a more profound critical purchase on Russian politico-historical discourse *in toto*. Kibirov’s latest writing should be seen in the context of a movement among Russian artists that has come to be known as “the new sincerity”—a rejection of irony as the only appropriate stance towards shared social values for contemporary artists and audiences.<sup>24</sup> Yet the work of this older poet constitutes a self-conscious (and perhaps ironic) meditation on this rejection of the ironic mode, which has been so central to his poetics.

In the title poem of his 2006 book, “Kara-Baras! An Experiment in Interpretation of a Classic Text” (“Кара-барас! Опыт интерпретации классического текста”), Kibirov offers up a hymn to eternal Russian spiritual values, traced back to Alexander Pushkin in his identity as founding prophet of the Russian cultural tradition (with an ironically inflected nationalist tinge), refracted startlingly through the Soviet era children’s verse of Kornei Chukovskii. Like most of his best work, Kibirov’s poem is too long to cite in full here. It is a hilarious riff on Chukovskii’s famous “hygienic” poem, which tells the tale of an unwashed child so dirty that clothing and household objects run away from him. In the course of the poem the youngster is convinced to clean up his act, brought to the wisdom of washing and to a reconciliation with his alienated belongings through an encounter with the animated, and rather preachy, washbasin “Scrub-itragged” (“Мойдодыр”)—this last is the title of Chukovskii’s work. Kibirov replaces the initial lines of the classic text, “the blanket has run away” (“Одеяло убежало”), with “the ideals have run away” (“Идеалы убежали”) and relates the story of an encounter with the sacred Logos that leads the author back to the wisdom of spiritual and cultural piety. Kibirov’s poem tells the story of reconciliation not with boots, candles, and sandwiches, but with the objects of past history and the national canon. In the work’s climactic episode, the author encounters the “six-winged Seraph” of Pushkin’s poem “Prophet” (“Пророк,” 1826)—a foundational text for Russia’s cul-

<sup>24</sup> Alexei Yurchak, “Post-Post-Communist Sincerity: Pioneers, Cosmonauts and Other Soviet Heroes Born Today,” in *What Is Soviet Now? Identities, Legacies, Memories*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Peter Solomon (Berlin: LIT Verlag, forthcoming).

tural myth of the poet-as-saint, in which a scene of the prophet's divine election (Isaiah 6: 1–10) is revised to tell of the poet's sacred inspiration. In Kibirov's version, the Seraph, shadowed by a mocking and contemptuous Pushkin, reminds the contemporary author of his sacred calling with a much-cited phrase from the Romantic poet's "Prophet," "Look on and attend!" ("ВИЖДЬ И ВНЕМАИ!"), initiating the return to him of poetic sound and meaning. Below, on the left, is a translation of this passage, leading into the final lines of "Kara-Baras!" Printed in parallel on the right are the analogous lines of Chukovskii's "Scrubitragged" (the Crocodile, Totosha and Kokosha are references to the characters of another of Chukovskii's children's poems):

Then my dear, my very own  
Six-winged Seraph came up near.  
Beside him, sniffing with derision,  
Alexander Pushkin sneered.

"Step lively—look on and attend!"  
Pronounced the Seraph.

And he roared and gnashed his teeth

At me,

How he clomped his wings

At me:

"Now look, you, no more pranks,"

He said,

"And say 'please' and 'thanks,'"

He said,

"Or else I'll fly away,"

He said,

"And not come back this way!"

He said.

How I set off down the street

Yes I ran.

And sped back to my father's hearth

Once again.

Meaning, meaning

Meaning, meaning—

I begged for it, beseeched and prayed.

Washed off the soot

Cleaned up the essence

And scraped the hardened wax away.

And right away the colors, sounds

Resounded in the quiet air:

"Go on, grasp us, stupid oaf—

Just more gently, with more care!"

And then a little sonnet:

"Compose me, man, doggonit!"

Then my dear, my very own  
Crocodile came right up near.  
He, Totosha and Kokosha  
Were walking down the alley here.

And my washcloth, like a birdie  
That croc, he gulped it, gulped it whole.

And he roared and gnashed his teeth

At me,

How he clomped his feet

At me:

"You go straight home now, bub,"

He said,

"And give your face a scrub,"

He said,

"Or else I'll fly at you,"

He said,

"And stomp on you and eat you up!"

He said.

How I set out down the street

Yes I ran.

And sped back to the washstand

Once again.

Soap, soap

Soap, soap

I washed and washed and didn't cease

Washed off the shoe-black

And the ink

From my grimy, filthy cheeks.

And right away my pants, my pants

They went and jumped into my hands.

And after them a small meat-pie

"Go on, buddy, go on and eat me,

And then a sandwich, at a run

Ran right up—right up my tongue!

Then Eros came back at a run.  
(Let's ignore the rhyme with "tongue.")

Then my book returned,  
And my textbook too,  
And poetics started prancing  
With metaphysics all a-dancing.

And now the primeval Logos,  
By which the world itself was made  
Leader of the ancient chorus,  
Commander of all words and sense  
Ran up to me a-dancing  
And with a kiss declaimed:

"Now I really love you,  
Now I really praise you,  
At last, my little sonny,  
You've done your logopedist proud!"

One must, one must give thanks to God.  
In the mornings and at night, the same,  
And to all those impure nihilists  
(*Var.: And to all shitbag Voltaireans*)  
Disgrace and shame!  
Disgrace and shame!

Hurrah for the purest Truth!  
And for radiant beauty,  
For goodness unto men,  
And our immortal pen!

So let us, o brothers, strive,  
Not to quarrel, not to give in,  
In anguish, disorder and darkness,  
In barracks, diseased and endless—

For ever and ever,  
Everywhere and forever—  
Glory eternal,  
Memory unfading,  
Glory eternal  
To life!

Raise the tin tub up at last!  
God is with us! Kara-baras!

—Timur Kibirov, 2006

Then my book returned,  
And textbook too,  
And grammar started prancing  
With arithmetic a-dancing.

And now the great washbasin,  
That most famous Scrubitragged  
Leader of all sinks,  
Commander of all sponges  
Ran up to me a-dancing  
And with a kiss declaimed:

"Now I really love you,  
Now I really praise you,  
At last, my little pigpen,  
You've done Scrubitragged proud!"

One must, one must bathe every day.  
In the mornings and at night, the same,  
And to all those dirty chimney-sweeps

Disgrace and shame!  
Disgrace and shame!

Hurrah for fragrant soap!  
And for the fluffy towel,  
For toothpaste and for toothbrushes,  
And for combs and brushes!

So let us bathe and splash,  
Cavort, and dive and wash  
In tubs, in buckets and in barrels,  
In oceans, rivers and in streams,

And in baths and saunas  
Everywhere and forever—  
Glory eternal,  
To water!

—Kornei Chukovskii, 1923

Вдруг навстречу мой хороший  
Шестикрылый Серафим.  
И презрительные рожи  
Корчит Пушкин рядом с ним.

"Ну-ка живо—виждь и внемли!"—  
Возглашает Серафим.

А потом как зарычит  
На меня,  
Как крылами застучит  
На меня:  
"Ну-ка, братец, не дури,  
Говорит,  
И спасибо говори,  
Говорит,  
А не то как улечу,  
Говорит,  
И назад не ворочусь!"—  
Говорит.

Как пустился я по улице  
Бежать,  
Прибежал к Порогу Отчему  
Опять.

Смысла, смысла,  
Смысла, смысла  
Домогался и молил,  
Копоть смыл

И суть отчистил,  
Воск застывший отскоблил.

И сейчас же краски, звуки,  
Зазвучали в тишине:  
"Восприми нас, глухой злюка,  
Осторожней и нежней!"

А за ними и стихок:  
"Сочини меня, дружок!"

А за ними и Эрот.  
(Оставляем рифму "в рот"!)

Вот и книжка воротилась,  
Воротилась тетрадь,  
И поэтика пустилась  
С метафизикой плясать.

Вдруг навстречу мой хороший,  
Мой любимый Крокодил.  
Он с Тотошей и Кокошей  
По аллее проходил

И мочалку, словно галку,  
Словно галку, проглотил.

А потом как зарычит  
На меня,  
Как ногами застучит  
На меня:  
"Уходи-ка ты домой,  
Говорит,  
Да лицо своё умой,  
Говорит,  
А не то как налечу,  
Говорит,  
Расстопчу и проглочу!"  
Говорит.

Как пустился я по улице  
Бежать,  
Прибежал я к умывальнику  
Опять.

Мылом, мылом  
Мылом, мылом  
Умывался без конца,  
Смыл и ваксу  
И чернила  
С неумытого лица.

И сейчас же брюки, брюки  
Так и прыгнули мне в руки.  
А за ними пирожок:  
"Ну-ка, съешь меня, дружок!"

А за ним и бутерброд:  
Подскочил—и прямо в рот!

Вот и книжка воротилась,  
Воротилась тетрадь,  
И грамматика пустилась  
С арифметикой плясать.

Тут уж Логос изначальный,  
 Коим создавался мир,  
 Хора древнего Начальник,  
 Слов и смыслов Командир,  
 Подбежал ко мне танцуя  
 И, целуя, говорил:

"Вот теперь тебя люблю я,  
 Вот теперь тебя хвалю я!  
 Наконец-то ты, сынуля,  
 Логопеду угодил!"

Надо, надо Бога славить  
 По утрам и вечерам,  
 А нечистым Нигилистам—  
 (*вариант—а засранцам—вольтерьянцам*)  
 Стыд и срам!  
 Стыд и срам!

Да здравствует Истина чистая  
 И Красотища лучистая,  
 Истое наше Добро,  
 Вечное наше перо!

Давайте же, братцы, стараться,  
 Не злобиться, не поддаваться  
 В тоске, в бардаке и во мраке,  
 В чумном бесконечном бараке —

И паки, и паки,  
 И ныне и присно —  
 Вечная слава —  
 Вечная память —  
 Вечная слава  
 Жизни!

Подымайте Медный таз!  
 С нами Бог! Кара-барас!

—Timur Kibirov, 2006<sup>25</sup>

Тут великий Умывальник,  
 Знаменитый Мойдодыр  
 Умывальников Начальник  
 И мочалок Командир,  
 Подбежал ко мне танцуя  
 И, целуя, говорил:

"Вот теперь тебя люблю я,  
 Вот теперь тебя хвалю я!  
 Наконец-то ты, грязнуля,  
 Мойдодыру угодил!"

Надо, надо умываться  
 По утрам и вечерам,  
 А нечистым трубочистам -  
 Стыд и срам!  
 Стыд и срам!

Да здравствует мыло душистое,  
 И полотенце пушистое,  
 И зубной порошок,  
 И густой гребешок!

Давайте же мыться, плескаться,  
 Купаться, нырять, кувыркаться  
 В ушате, в корыте, в лохани,  
 В реке, в ручейке, в океане,

И в ванне, и в бане,  
 Всегда и везде  
 Вечная слава  
 Воде!

—Kornei Chukovskii, 1923

In order to grasp how this parodic treatment of a classic Soviet children's poem manages to articulate an earnest piety towards the Soviet and Russian literary tradition and the spiritual values that Kibirov treats so cavalierly, one must first appreciate the special cultural status of Chukovskii, who belongs to a distinctive class of Soviet figures who enjoyed successful careers as members of the cultural establishment yet retained reputations for moral sensibility and independent thought. (Better-known examples of this type, who are frequently and reductively cast in retrospect as "closet dissidents," include Boris Pasternak, Sergei Eisenstein, and Dmitrii Shostakovich.) In Chukovskii's case, this mediating position is magnified by the nature of his

primary readership: Soviet children's verse often operated as a special sub-territory of the literary, where authors whose works might be unacceptable in adult literature could still publish. The works of this distinctive realm, insulated from official culture so as to bear a less obvious or less suspect socializing intent, and endowed by childhood memory with the sheen of licensed nostalgia, are especially well equipped to combine a secure place in the Soviet canon with persistent appeal to post-Soviet, anti-Soviet and now post-post-Soviet sensibilities.

Yet perhaps the most important mechanism enabling Kibirov's combination of absurd irony and earnestness in this poem is the poet's stance towards official Soviet public discourse—a stance characteristic of the last generation of the Soviet intelligentsia. Men and women who reached maturity during the late 1970s and early 1980s experienced Soviet society as a ubiquitous system of institutions, linguistic norms, and values that was paradoxically both unquestioned and universally discredited—in the trenchant formulae of Alexei Yurchak, this system was “everlasting and steadily declining, full of vigor and bleakness, dedicated to high ideals and devoid of them.”<sup>26</sup> Shared experience of these mutually constitutive yet mutually inconsistent realms of meaning allowed for the proliferation of everyday engagements of common-place Soviet discourses that reproduced them as the unavoidable scaffolding of social meaning, yet which reinvested them with additional, alternative meanings and values. One common strategy in this game of inventive reuse of authoritative language was the ironic citation not merely of official clichés, but of a complete spectrum of Soviet cultural and social markers, from the names of standard Soviet restaurant dishes and perfumes to dialogue from well-known film comedies. As Yurchak has explained, this form of irony, referred to as *stiob*, characteristically carried out a displacement of “normal” or “authoritative” social practice in order to open out a zone of sincerity, heartfelt affection, and common tastes and desires in the interstices of a ubiquitous and vacuous public space and language.<sup>27</sup>

At the heart of much of Kibirov's poetry from the 1980s and continuing in the 1990s was a strategy, related to *stiob*, of ironic citation of authoritative public discourse. Yet one must note that while the quotidian irony of late-Soviet *stiob* was not primarily subversive or anti-official, Kibirov's early work, like the Soviet underground movement of Sots-Art that it was modeled on, consistently turns this instrument towards the outright deflation and ridicule of authoritative Soviet language.<sup>28</sup> One may recall what is perhaps Kibirov's most well-known poem of the late 1980s, “When Lenin was a Little Boy” (“Когда был Ленин маленьким”), which, like “Kara-Baras!,” cites and plays off of a “classic” of Soviet children's literature. Yet in this earlier work Kibirov targets not a universally beloved text like Chukovskii's “Scrubitragged,” but rather a bald example of propaganda for pre-teens: an inspirational storybook about Lenin's boyhood. Kibirov's “When Lenin was a Little Boy” supplements that original text with absurd lyrical musings on such matters as the revolutionary leader's moment of conception, as experienced by his parents:

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<sup>26</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 282.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 238–81.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 243, 250–51.

[...] “Мария!—  
от нежности охрипшим басом начал  
инспектор,— Поздно! Спать пора, Мария!”  
И было что-то в голосе его,  
Что Марья Александровна зарделась.

[...] “Maria!”—  
The inspector began in his hoarse basso,  
“It’s late! It’s time to go to bed!”  
And there was something in his voice  
That made Mar’ia Aleksandrova blush.

Typically, in anti-Soviet works like this, all that remains of the non-subversive ambivalence of *stiob* is the communal pleasure of the shared joke (Kibirov’s works are pretty much lacking in anything like “dissident outrage”), or in some instances a hint of heartfelt nostalgia for simple (perhaps illusory) beliefs and simple (perhaps illusory) material pleasures. One might suggest that Kibirov’s works of the 1980s and early 1990s period combined a withering ironic dismissal of authoritative Soviet language with a stance of nostalgia for *stiob* itself: that shared, ironic, yet homely, position that was made possible by universal, and universally discredited Soviet discourse.<sup>29</sup> Yet surprisingly, in contrast to his earlier practices, “Kara-Baras!” perfectly exemplifies *stiob* in the more precise sense described by Yurchak, hilariously shifting markers to carve out a zone of earnest, heartfelt meaning, yet accomplishing this without dismissing or degrading the ironically targeted original. Rather, there is a self-infantilizing humility to this poem, which reduces Kibirov to child or clown while allowing Chukovskii, Pushkin, and the Logos to remain, despite the poet’s antics, as true authorities. Or perhaps it would be more just to say that the poem projects the spiritual authority of a Russian anti-tradition of poets clowning around at the carnival margins of worldly authority—Pushkin, Chukovskii, and now Kibirov. In the end, the content of the poem mirrors its parodic form, which acts out the need to reproduce these cultural and spiritual authorities as the bases for common experience or meaning, yet resists the reduction of tradition to dull-witted and oppressive political authority.

As a route towards contextualizing and rendering more apparent this shift in the implications of Kibirov’s poetic strategies, compare “Kara-Baras!” with a contrasting phenomenon of recent years in Russia from a different realm of cultural life: the rehabilitation of the Soviet Hymn. In early 2001, resolving a decade-long crisis of hymnlessness in the Russian Federation, newly elected President Putin reinstated the Soviet National Anthem as that of the Russian Federation, with lyrics rejiggered, startlingly, by the same long-lived Sergei Mikhalkov who not only had written the original words in the Stalinist era but who had authored the post-Stalinist rewrite of the Hymn to boot.<sup>30</sup> In obvious manner, the old-new Hymn is a tool for assertion of historical continuity linking the present with the Soviet past—a past that the new lyrics furthermore describe as continuous with Russian national history before it:

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Freidin, “Transfiguration of Kitsch—Timur Kibirov’s Sentiments: A Farewell Elegy for Soviet Civilization,” in *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, ed. Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 123–45; Sofya Khagi, “Art as Aping: The Uses of Dialogism in Timur Kibirov’s ‘To Igor’ Pomerantsev. Summer Reflections on the Fate of Belles Lettres,” *Russian Review* 61, no. 4 (2002): 579–98.

<sup>30</sup> Oushakine, “Post-Soviet Aphasia,” 997–98; Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 160–61, 181–84; J. Martin Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity,” *Ethnomusicology* 47, no. 1 (2003): 42–67.

Россия—священная наша держава,  
 Россия—любимая наша страна.  
 Могучая воля, великая слава—  
 Твое достоянье на все времена!

Russia—our blessed state,  
 Russia—our beloved land.  
 Mighty will and great glory  
 In all times are your fate!

Славься, Отечество наше свободное,  
 Братских народов союз вековой,  
 Предками данная мудрость народная!  
 Славься, страна! Мы гордимся тобой!

Be glorious, our free fatherland,  
 Immortal union of brotherly peoples,  
 National wisdom, bequeathed by our forebears!  
 Be glorious, nation! We have pride in you!

### State Hymn of the Russian Federation, lyrics by S. N. Mikhalkov, 2001

Before discussing the stark differences between the Hymn and Kibirov’s “Kara-Baras!,” let’s first consider their commonalities. On the most abstract level of compositional strategy, expressing what I take to be hallmark features of the current political and aesthetic moment, both offer reassertions of timeless values and cultural continuity, articulated through the lens of a revision of a classic Soviet cultural document. Note that neither of these texts can be seen as expressions of nostalgia, if what we mean by this term is the longing for what is dead and past—for each establishes its referent as a bearer of present cultural and political value. Both Kibirov’s poem and the Hymn, as well, may be read not only as reaffirmations of the continuity and integrity of the Russian tradition, but also as rejections of alien and, in particular, “Western” impositions. The revised anthem recovers, among other things, the context and resonance of its first adoption in 1944, when it rang out as a wartime expression of the unity and might of the Soviet Union in opposition to the encroachments of the corrupt West: “We have raised up our army in battle. / We shall sweep all vile occupiers from our path!” (“Мы армию нашу растили в сраженьях. / Захватчиков подлых с дороги сметём!” from the Hymn of the Soviet Union, 1944 version)—as commentators have noted, one key advantage to a state Hymn with multiple variant lyrics is that a fragmented polity can experience affective unity by singing different words in one “polylogic” chorus.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, “Kara-Baras!” includes not only the ritualistic dismissal, cited above, of stock-figure villains of “Western corruption,” Voltaireans and Nihilists—standard whipping boys of ideological infection for Russian Imperial Official Nationalists and for Slavophiles and their successors during the nineteenth-century—but also a dethroning of their contemporary equivalents in the cultural sphere—the very villains, apparently, responsible for the blasphemy against meaning described by the poet:

Боже, боже,  
 Что случилось?  
 Отчего же  
 Всё кругом  
 Завертелось,  
 Закружилось  
 И помчалось колесом?

Lordy, lordy,  
 What’s gone on here?  
 Why on earth,  
 Head over heels,  
 Has everything  
 Tipped over, spun,  
 Then left, with cartwheels, at a run?

<sup>31</sup> Daughtry, “Russia’s New Anthem,” 60–62.

<sup>32</sup> Kibirov, *Kara-Baras!*, 48–56.

(в смысле ницшеанского вечного возвращения или буддийского кармического ужаса, дурной бесконечности— вообще всякой безысходности)

(in the sense of Nietzschean eternal recurrence or Buddhist karmic horror and bad infinity—in general, any sort of hopelessness)

Гностицизм  
За солипсизмом,  
Солипсизм  
За атеизмом,  
Атеизм  
За гностицизмом,  
Деррида  
За М. Фуко.

Gnosticism  
Flies after a solecism,  
A solecism,  
Then atheism,  
Atheism  
After Gnosticism,  
Derrida,  
Then M. Foucault.

(Деррида здесь помещен более для шутки, М. Фуко— более для рифмы)<sup>32</sup>

(Derrida is included here more for the joke; M. Foucault—more for the rhyme)

Note that both for this poet and for Russian political life such an overt elision of the ostensible historical rupture (dividing Soviet from post-Soviet) and replacement of it by a resurgent geographical/civilizational divide (dividing Russia from the West) would have been impossible five or ten years ago. The mark of the new is the reassertion of the old. In Kibirov's case, one may note that even the choice of Chukovskii's poem as a target for civilizational salvage emphasizes a continuity-based model of Russian cultural history. As Boris Gasparov brilliantly explained in a classic essay, in 1923 "Scrubitragged" constituted a final salvo in Chukovskii's long polemic with anti-traditionalist Futurists—a text that both brought Futurist iconoclasm to heel by domesticating avant-garde poetics for "family consumption" in an amelioration of the historical, aesthetic and political rupture that poets like Maiakovskii had sought to assert in a corollary to the revolutionary historical break of that era.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the distinctions between the two examples I offer here are great, far beyond the mere fact that one is funny and one ... isn't. Mikhalkov's Hymn effects a reclamation of political affect through seizure of political symbols that are still warm not only with an unmarked Soviet sensibility, but with the excess heat of the Stalinist cult of personality. In contrast, as we have seen, the poet's recovery project aims to salvage the affectively loaded material of the Soviet quotidian and the ageless spiritual values of the intelligentsia—culture and spirit. To make this distinction more precise, while the Hymn projects, in authoritative language, the continuity of the political tradition and the collective identity it sanctions, Kibirov's use of *stio*b recovers a shared realm of cultural meaning that persists at the expense of precisely this sort of authoritative public language (although, admittedly, this alternative realm of meaning is also parasitically dependent on such language). In a further reflection of these divergences, the works present two distinct possibilities for assessment of the more recent past. The Hymn is of a piece with the displacement in present-day political rhetoric of the 1990s as a legitimate element of the genealogy of Russian statehood and social identity—the foundation of Russia's current democratic institutions, such as they are, finds no reflection in the new lyrics. Kibirov's work, in contrast, not only constructs a seamless cultural anti-tradition, but also maps out a continuous history of corruption that implicitly ties the profanity excoriated by Pushkin's prophet to the "dirt" of the Soviet era to the

<sup>33</sup> B. M. Gasparov, "Moi do dyr" [Scrub It Ragged], *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 1, no. 1 (1992): 304–19.

chaos of the 1990s and the cynicism of the Putin era that has followed it, linking them together in a single scene of “barracks, diseased and endless” (“чумной бесконечный барак”). So while Kibirov and the revised Hymn are, in some sense, on the same page, they are on different sides of it—pursuing rather different programs. One might even venture that, in some sense, the proper object of Kibirov’s parody in “Kara-Baras!” is none other than the Hymn itself—or the political discourse of the new Russia that it epitomizes. This is to say, Kibirov’s “The ideals have run away” parodies not Chukovskii’s “The blanket has run away,” but rather Putin’s “old ideals were destroyed” (see the second epigraph above).

To sum up this analysis, consider again the view back along the poetic trajectory that has brought Kibirov to “Kara-Baras!,” which lucidly reveals the evolution of the aesthetic and critical possibilities dependent on the politico-historical myths of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. From his late Soviet debut onwards, Kibirov danced across the divide between authoritative Soviet public discourse and its various opponents (or partners): the anti-Soviet, the post-Soviet. Works of the 1980s such as “When Lenin was a Little Boy” (“Когда был Ленин маленьким”) outrageously deflated Soviet public language through ironic ridicule. Later, at the crux of Soviet collapse, Kibirov was offering parodic treatments of the holdovers of the Soviet past in the post-Soviet moment such as, for instance, the 1990 epistle to Sergei Gandlevskii cited above, which passed through a grotesque catalogue of post-Soviet social heterogeneity only to arrive at the conclusion: “There is nothing new under the moon” (“Ничто не ново под луною”).<sup>34</sup> This was a rather startling assertion, given the general consensus uniting both the euphoric and the fearful during 1990, when the poem was composed, concerning the novelty of the “sociocultural situation.” Yet this was exactly the point of the revolutionary grotesque: to present, by means of a monstrous mating of purportedly antithetical historical epochs, a critique of the subterranean, concealed and illegitimate continuities that belied the myth of historical rupture and social transformation. In a sense, in “Kara-Baras!” the poet is up to his old tricks again—still pursuing the alchemical combination of the Soviet and its opposites. Yet now, the poet offers an earnest affirmation of historical continuity with the Soviet and pre-Soviet pasts in the key of *stiob* and its displacement of authoritative discourse. What has happened? In the Putin years, the stakes of Kibirov’s habitual tropes changed: as the myth of the revolutionary transformation of the Soviet order into some new social reality collapsed, the aesthetic mechanisms that were once balanced against that myth lost force. Little remains now of the aesthetic shock and critical import of bridging the historical divide in a political-rhetorical situation where the historical and stylistic combinatorics that once signaled ironic deflation have themselves been co-opted by phenomena like the revised Hymn. A reinvigorated poetics of *stiob*, in this novel context, is the path by which the poet recovers critical edge, enabling him to confront standard versions of historical continuity, known to all, with an alternative, non-authoritarian, vision of the interconnections of present and past.

Let’s consider one additional, contrasting example of this shift in aesthetic possibilities in present-day Russia. In 2002, Russian artists Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin embarked on an ambitious new project: an updated version of a work by the canonical pre-revolutionary Russian artist Ilya E. Repin, “Official Session of the State Council on May 7, 1901, the Centennial Anniversary of the Founding of the Council” (“Торжественное заседание Государственного совета 7 мая в день столетнего юбилея со дня его учреждения”). In Bogdalov’s and Kalinin’s version, “Session of the Federal Assembly” (“Заседание Федерального собрания”; the govern-

<sup>34</sup> Platt, *History in a Grotesque Key*, 171–86.

ing body of the new work's title is a fictitious one) the tens of assembled personages of the original painting are replaced by a panoply of portraits of contemporary notables, including Vladimir Putin and other leading political figures.<sup>35</sup> As commentators noted in reception of the painting, the work (like Kibirov's texts) derives its pedigree from the late-Soviet underground art movement of Sots-Art that pioneered the strategy of ironic permutations of official and alternative images and stylistic registers.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps recognizing the track record of this technique and its potential for anti-authoritarian effects, when Bogdalov and Kalinin contacted the individuals chosen for representation in the new painting, all but two of them refused to sit for the artists. Yet an odd thing happened in the process of work on the painting: that same class of Russian elites who had instinctively mistrusted the work when it was in the planning stage came to openly embrace it, praising it as an appropriate and flattering reaffirmation of Russian political and social history, and eventually snapping up studies for the work at auction to decorate their drawing rooms.

In effect, the ironic implications of a technique that depended on the shock of a forced overcoming of historical distance had dissolved, reducing what would have appeared as a grotesque only a short while to the status of a clever vanity piece. Of course, in distinction from Kibirov, who renovates by other means his aesthetic arsenal's potential for critique, Bogdalov and Kalinin have instead capitalized on the broadened appeal of these techniques among Russia's moneyed classes—truly, their painting represents a commodified version of Mikhalkov's Hymn. One should remark as well that the primary referent of Bogdalov and Kalinin's creative anachronism is the pre-revolutionary, rather than the Soviet, era. Yet both Repin and the realist school of painting that he represents, the Itinerants, were canonized in the Soviet period as representative of the wellsprings of Socialist Realist art. In this light, the contemporary update of the painting may be seen, like Kibirov's poem and the rewritten Hymn, as articulations of a shared sense of political and cultural continuity, linking the present not merely with a discrete moment in the past, but with a long, nationalist-tinged prehistory. (This, I would add, relates to an important factor, often overlooked, underwriting the contemporary establishment's renovations of Russian national historical and cultural myths: the last such rehabilitation project took place in the 1930s in the service of Stalinist propaganda. In this sense, the Russian Imperial and the quintessentially Soviet are not so far distant; the proper inflection of the former aptly evokes the latter.<sup>37</sup>) Here, then, is a rough dating of the tipping point when historical continuity, rather than rupture, began to dominate the horizon of social experience and historical imagination in Russia: from about 2002 onwards. As with Kibirov's poem, Bogdalov and Kalinin's case demonstrates how the reemergence of what was once imagined as a closed and finished Soviet past as a constitutive element of contemporary subjectivity and social experience has precipitated the obsolescence or transformation of key elements of the aesthetic arsenal of the 1990s, that were predicated on revolutionary rupture and the radical opposition of successive epochs, pre-revolutionary, Soviet and post-Soviet.

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<sup>35</sup> Tat'iana Markina, "Auktsion na federal'nom urovne" [An Auction at the Federal Level], *Kommersant*, November 18, 2005, <http://www.kommersant.ru> (accessed May 18, 2007); Oushakine, "We're Nostalgic."

<sup>36</sup> Irina Kulik, "Rossiiskie politiki plokho prodaiutsia" [Russian Politicians Not Selling Well], *Kommersant*, November 18, 2005, <http://www.kommersant.ru> (accessed May 18, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt, "Introduction: Tsarist-Era Heroes in Stalinist Mass Culture and Propaganda," in *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, ed. Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 3–14.

**WHAT NEXT?**

In conclusion, I want to consider again the larger implications of the end of the post-Soviet. Authoritative political discourse in Moscow projected the Putin years as a return to the firm ground of social and cultural stability from the chaos and crises of the 1990s. As the Hymn has it:

Широкий простор для мечты и для жизни	A grand expanse for dreams and for life
Грядущие нам открывают года.	Is opened out by future years.
Нам силу даёт наша верность Отчизне.	Faith in the Fatherland gives us strength.
Так было, так есть и так будет всегда!	So it was, so it is, and so it will always be!

In the Medvedev years, which are shaping up in Russia (like the Obama years are in the West) as the era of financial crisis, efforts so far seem to be directed at hanging on to this same historical vision as long as it can be made to stick. Yet despite the optimism of the new version of the collective past, something rather different is going on. At base, one dominant historical metaphor—that of historical rupture and social rebirth—has been replaced by another—that of civilizational continuity—as the authoritative tool for the construction of social identity. Neither of these public discursive formations accounts well for the actualities of social experience and a political history that exceed both in their complexity. Yet Kibirov’s “Kara-Baras!,” I would propose, is symptomatic of other possibilities inherent in present-day Russia that give cause for a modest optimism that, as current crises progress and the vacuity of both of these discursive tools becomes readily apparent to all, a more (dare I say it) authentic conception of recent history and present identity may be emergent. For it is only now, perhaps, that Russians are beginning to see the stakes of change (rather than of “revolution” or “transition”) a bit more clearly.

Let’s try to separate myth from reality. As I explain above, the organizing idea of Russian social and political experience in the 1990s (and of Western interpretations of it as well) was the Manichean concept of a global transformation of the “totalitarian” Soviet Russia into its opposite, the democratic, free-market Russia of the future. Yet the reality of the 1990s, sometimes difficult to see and hear beneath the triumphant celebration and then mourning of the “New World Order,” was a multifarious political and cultural continuity with a Soviet past that was itself no less hybrid, complex and unevenly grounded in its own historical precedents than what followed it. Furthermore, as many now agree, the seeds of the recent reassertion of historical and institutional continuity with the past on the part of Putin’s Kremlin and of the policies which that reassertion legitimated were sown precisely in the political and social environment of the 1990s, under the shadow of the myth of revolutionary transformation. For in those years, in service to the chimera of a clean break with the past, progress towards the creation of a pluralistic political system or the incremental improvement of social justice in Russia was repeatedly sacrificed to the ritual exorcism of the communist past—the wild fear of a red power-grab serving as the rationale for the shelling of the Khasbulatov parliament in 1993, the rigging of the elections in 1995–96 under the slogan “victory at all costs,” etc. In short, during the post-Soviet 1990s, Russia was plagued by mutual interference of the ideological content of the myth of post-Soviet social transformation and the programmatic and pragmatic requirements of effective amelioration of the Soviet social and political legacy. In this light, perhaps the most important novel phenomenon of the present is the fading of the myth of revolutionary historical rupture itself. Which is not to say that the ideological illusions of current historical myths are any less pernicious, but

that an opening for a different model of social and political action may have appeared where there was none before. Kara-Baras!

The optic that renders this opening visible is Kibirov's vision of Russian and Soviet history—a long story of recovery at the margins of durable, sacred truths in the face of the persistence of “anguish, disorder and darkness, / In barracks, diseased and endless.” And it is this optic that brings into sharper focus the current state of Russian society, crisis and all, as well as the absurd ideological sleight-of-hand of Russia's new Hymn and of the discursive mechanisms it depends upon. For as any visitor to Moscow must immediately notice, the past eight years in Russia have accomplished not only renovation and reconstruction, but also the production of ... new ruins. This debris of more recent vintage is none other than the wreckage of the post-Soviet era—the ruins of “free-market democracy,” of “transition,” or of “the liminal” (whichever you prefer). These signs of the aftermath, or perhaps we should term it the end of the aftermath (or the after-aftermath), are everywhere, structurally and ideologically. Perhaps the most obvious such “new ruin” is the steel and glass office building on Moscow's Paveletskaja Square that once served as the headquarters of Mikhail Khodorkovskii's now defunct oil mega-corporation Yukos. Once a glittering symbol of the impending future, the trophy building stood for much of 2006 vacant and decrepit, and was in 2007 sold off with the last remaining Yukos assets in a rigged auction favoring Kremlin insiders. And despite the fact that the victimization of Khodorkovskii was rather popular among the Russian public, his fate also epitomizes the sense of vulnerability of Russia's new social elites, *pace* the revised Hymn's promise that “A grand expanse for dreams and for life / Is opened out to us by future years.” For quite apart from the sense that Russia has, once again, economically and politically “arrived,” a survey of members of the young urban middle class even before the economic crisis demonstrated that these most prosperous beneficiaries of the new Russian social order live with an extraordinarily heightened sense of the fragility of their gains and the uncertainty of their position.<sup>38</sup> What they are thinking in the midst of the crisis is anyone's guess.

Perhaps the best illustration of the complexities of the present moment is to be found in the story of Moscow's fallen Soviet-era statuary. This is a story that has been told before—but here I want to give it a slightly different emphasis, and a different conclusion. One of the major tourist photo-ops of the early 1990s in Moscow was the site in the Gorky Park of Culture, where a number of monuments had been deposited unceremoniously in a heap following their fall from grace. Yet this was just the beginning of their post-Soviet afterlife. By the mid 1990s the statues had been reinstalled on pedestals in a park across the street next to the Central House of Artists that came to be known as “Sculpture Park” (a rhyming pun on the “Culture Park” where the objects had lain). Soon thereafter they were graced with plaques that, rather than explain the identity and ideological significance of the represented leaders, instead narrated the history of the monuments themselves—created by whom, where and when erected and dismounted, by whose decision. As commentators have noted, both the re-erection of the monuments and the plaques framed the works in a largely neutral manner, allowing both for both critical distancing and for nostalgic recollection and reflection, according to the taste of the spectator.<sup>39</sup> At this

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<sup>38</sup> In July 2008, the Levada Center public opinion research organization published its report, much commented on in the press, concerning the attitudes of the Russian middle class regarding economic and political conditions in Russia. See “Russkij srednij klass: ego vgliad na svoju stranu i Evropu” [The Russian Middle Class: Views about Russia and Europe], Levada-tsentr, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008070101.html> (accessed August 11, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 83–91.

stage, the effect was similar to that of Budapest's more deliberately executed Statue Park Museum: the Soviet era was exhibited as past, yet still relevant, as a completed epoch that still retained significance in a variety of interpretive modes.<sup>40</sup> Yet curiously, by the dawn of the new millennium, the neutral frame was modified by the appearance of a large number of additional sculptural objects in the same park—old unsuccessful competition entries, busts of world cultural figures, abstractions, new works by contemporary artists—interspersed in no particular order with such politically charged objects as the monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet state's first secret police, that once stood before the KGB headquarters.<sup>41</sup> No longer serving as a dispassionate frame for objects that represent a completed yet still relevant past (whether longed for or despised), the new additions to the park worked to efface the boundary between past and present, obscuring the ruins of the Soviet past beneath a clutter of more recent pasts and presents, themselves busily crumbling under the onslaught of Moscow's savage smog and weather. The effect mirrors the overall state of contemporary Moscow and Russia as a whole: the ruins of the Soviet era everywhere stand side by side with the unfinished projects and the unprocessed messes of the "transitional" period of the 1990s. It is perhaps even fair to speculate that the disparate, interlarded strata of rubble in Moscow are well on their way to becoming indistinguishable from one another to the locals, especially to those who came of age in the last decade and a half. While one might have imagined in the late 1990s that the profusion of styles and eras in Moscow's built environment was symptomatic of the complexities of a liminal period, the fall not only of the "Soviet" but of the "post-Soviet" as well into interspersed ruins now signals the decay of the fantasies both of blue skies at the end of transition and of the exceptional (structured and opportunity-filled or incoherent and agonizing) "hybridity" of the present into a humdrum of unstructured complexity, or of complexity structured in other ways (economic stratification, geographical divergence, professional advantage, generational distance). I would propose that it is this new palpability of long-term social and historical complexity that may offer the best hope for a path forward in present-day Russia.

Now, the prospects for the development of political pluralism and economic equity do not look very promising at present in Russia. It is tempting to follow the example of more sensational commentators and political leaders in both Russia and the West and to view the present as a moment of resurgent "cold war" oppositions in the light of a Russian return to its "imperialistic" and "authoritarian" political roots, or to adopt a brand of historical determinism, viewing the present through the lens of previous revolutionary moments as a sort of Thermidor. The readiness of both Western and Russian media emphatically to adopt such positions from their polar opposite political standpoints in the wake of the war in the Caucasus last summer was not encouraging. However, I hope that there is room for less pessimism, just as there is room in Russian public discourse for far more variation than such visions of the present might suggest. If there is any benefit in distinguishing between ideologically suspect discursive constructions of social and political reality and the actuality of social conditions, it is in the possibility of critique and resistance—the possibility of pointing to the mess in the Caucasus and seeing not the phantasmatic contours of resurgent geopolitical myths, but the rampant vanity and disregard for human life of the leadership on all sides of the conflict. Yet in mishandling what could have been an

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<sup>40</sup> Nadkarni, "Death of Socialism."

<sup>41</sup> One summer in the late 1990s I visited the Sculpture Park and discovered a major art happening: sculptors working in a variety of media were set up in a row of tents in the park, busily producing new works. Perhaps they were supposed to be inspired by the masterpieces around them. Or by the historical rubble.

international standoff over South Ossetia into an international crisis, the current Russian administration undoubtedly overplayed its diplomatic and military hand. Time will tell whether it overplayed its domestic political capital as well—in that case and in the larger matter of recent anti-Western posturing—by demonstratively acting out a scenario of Russia’s particular interests to the point that they become a reality of international isolation, and by placing these purported national interests at odds with the economic wellbeing of stakeholders large and small, who have seen their opportunities for international economic contact diminish just when such contact is most needed for a Russian economic recovery.

In short, the Russian administration has demonstrated both its devotion to its new politico-historical myths, and their perniciousness. One must hope that the weak institutions of civil society that sprang up in the 1990s will allow Russians themselves to grasp the ruinous failure of this administration and these policies, and to move away from them towards less extreme positions offered by other voices. Kibirov, one may note, who was recently awarded a prestigious Russian national prize for poetry and is perhaps the most widely read poet of his generation, himself wields no little social authority.<sup>42</sup> In an interview regarding the poem I have taken as the last epigraph to this essay, the poet commented: “One of the most common and dangerous diseases of the Russian intelligentsia is the insistent articulation of historical analogies. Of course, it makes life easier, but it also prevents you from seeing the truth. [...] We are dealing here with a new reality, and there is no need to make sense out of things by employing instruments that have in fact outlived their usefulness.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, historical analogies mask the novel elements of any given historical conjuncture, and have the potential to work as self-fulfilling prophesies. For what is quite distinct about the present in Russia is the recognition among many outside the halls of power that the “revolution” of the 1990s should be seen as something less than one—that Russia’s recent history has been and should be seen as an effort to effect social progress in the face of problematic or productive long-term continuities, and that revolution, in its ironic tendency to reinstitute what it sets out to destroy, is a poor instrument by which to achieve social or political change.<sup>44</sup>

This marks a truly innovative, epochal transformation in Russian political culture. For the first time, Russian political life is open towards the past, which signals its potential for openness towards the future as well. For what Russia needs more than anything is a more viable relationship to the past than either the post-Soviet myth of revolutionary transcendence or the post-post-Soviet myth of civilizational return. Rather, Russians must discover a vision of the past as

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<sup>42</sup> So far, despite the fact that he is himself an ethnic Ossetian, Kibirov has made no public pronouncement that I can locate regarding the conflict in Georgia—which perhaps reveals his sense that the situation is far more complex than presented in any public discussion, Russian or Western.

<sup>43</sup> Natal’ia Kochhetkova, “Poet Timur Kibirov: ‘Molodye ne zhaiut, chto pomimo Petrosiana est’ Zoshchenko” [interview, “Poet Timur Kibirov: ‘The Young Do Not Know that Besides Petrosian There Is Also Zoshchenko’”], *Izvestiia*, November 10, 2006, <http://www.izvestia.ru> (accessed May 11, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> In a 2008 interview, Kibirov was questioned about “how he relates to Putin.” He answered: “How do I relate to Putin?...I don’t relate to him at all. More to the point, any sort of special relationship—lovingly pious or hysterically hateful—is completely incomprehensible to me. Because the problem is not Putin. [...] In my view, the failure of both the cult of Putin and the hatred of some part of the freedom-loving intelligentsia for it is that they both represent betrayals, illustrating the nostalgia on both sides of the equation for Soviet times, when everything was comfortable. [...] And I fear that we have the same thing today: ‘What can we do? This monster is sitting with his Kremlin administration and gives us no options!’ That is simply not so, and it’s very damaging.” Irina Permaikova, “Interv’iu s Timurom Kibirovym” [Interview with Timur Kibirov], *Novoe literaturnoe karta Rossii*, May 1, 2008, [http://www.litkarta.ru/dossier/interview-kibirov/dossier\\_5460/](http://www.litkarta.ru/dossier/interview-kibirov/dossier_5460/) (accessed September 1, 2008).

the scene of both colossal crimes and violence as well of great aspirations and achievements, holding out the possibility to found the future on the latter rather than the former. For what Russia, like any society, requires in order to process an agonizing historical experience and take meaningful action for social and political justice is an understanding of both the past and the present as scenes of problematically complex historical experience that demands future resolution, rather than as the bases for the illusory, already achieved transcendence of revolutionary rebirth. Such an understanding could serve as the foundation for actual, rather than ideologically impacted, efforts to ameliorate the injustices not only of the Soviet era but of the 1990s and 2000s as well—a foundation not for “transformation,” but simply for “change.” This, I believe, is the content of Kibirov’s “Kara-Baras!,” which models a vision of the past that could finally see not only fallen Soviet monuments, but also the countless Lenins left standing in Russian provinces, as what they are—not transparent symbols of political triumph or threatening resurgence, but as part of a long chain of ruins.<sup>45</sup> A

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257–58; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 1–22.