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POST-SOVIET LITERATURE AND THE SEARCH FOR A RUSSIAN IDENTITY

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For Midas and Hazel

A Note on Transliteration

For the spelling of Russian words I rely on the Library of Congress system of transliteration. In cases of well-known Russian terms and names which have been anglicized in a different way, I deviate from this system. Following the most common English spelling, I refer, for instance, to Tolstoy (not Tolstoi), Trotsky (not Trotskii), glasnost (instead of glasnost'), and Alexander (instead of Aleksandr).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 not only marked the beginning of an economically and politically uncertain period in Russian history but also unleashed a nationwide identity crisis. With the demise of communism, a series of vexed questions and concerns about Russia's unique national character, its "historical mission," and its cultural place in the world surged to the forefront of public and private life. Literary writers engaged with these concerns intensely from perestroika and the beginning of the post-Soviet era, but, as this study will show, a momentous shift occurred around the turn of the twenty-first century: in tandem with the decline of postmodernism and a groundswell of nostalgic and patriotic popular sentiment, prominent Russian writers claimed increasingly authoritative and politically committed positions in debates about Russian identity.

Even a recent, flag-waving patriotic novel like Alexander Prokhanov's *Crimea*, published in September 2014, invokes a Russian identity crisis, or at least conjures its looming specter. Prokhanov, a journalist and novelist, is one of the main spokesmen of a "neo-imperialist" trend in Russian culture, for whom a large, autocratically ruled empire is Russia's natural (and only genuine) form of existence. The novels of these neo-imperialists, and the works of Prokhanov, in particular, tend to mourn the recent loss of Russia's "imperial identity" and lament how liberalism and capitalism have eroded deep-rooted Russian values. At first glance,

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Crimea strikes a different chord. It brims with confident enthusiasm for what Russian nationalists call the "Russian Spring": the envisioned revival of Russia as a superpower kick-started with its annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

The novel's protagonist, Evgenii Lemekhov, is Russia's vice president and a confidant of Labazov, a thinly veiled portrait of president Putin. Lemekhov has special oversight over the country's arms factories. In Prokhanov's version of contemporary Russia, the arms industry can hardly keep up with the flood of orders for new submarines, laser weapons, and tanks, now that a "big armed conflict" with the West (Prokhanov, *Krym* 13) is imminent. Russia, under constant threat from American military might and a fifth column of devious "liberal agents [working for] the West" (15) keen to sabotage the revival of a strong Russia, meets these dangers with its "heroic factor[ies]" (120), where workers and engineers devotedly contribute to the "armada of technology" (215), the "holy Russian weaponry" (35) that will allow the country to fulfill its "historical mission" (15). Indeed, notwithstanding the book's streak of religious esotericism and its topical themes, *Crimea* features scenes that might have been based on Soviet propaganda posters or lifted from socialist–realist prose.

Underlying the book's hysterical fervor for the restoration of a Russian Empire, however, is a feeling of national humiliation and dislocation. The narrator and the sympathetic characters relentlessly underscore that Russians have, after 1991, tragically lost their messianic beliefs (83); that Russia's development has repeatedly been thwarted by destructive forces from the West (298); that the country's various historical self-definitions and shifting state ideologies do not add up to a coherent narrative of Russian identity (83); and, finally, that the collapse of the "red civilization" and the ensuing splintering of a sense of collective belonging have plunged Russians into a "a gloomy desert" (168), an "abyss" (136), or a "black hole" (207).

The plot of *Crimea* pivots around the attempts of Lemekhov to found a new nationalist party, named Victory. Its political program takes inspiration from (a particular interpretation of) the prose, poems, and plays of Alexander Pushkin, who appears as a key emblem of Russianness and a major source of national pride. According to the Party's ideologue (a specialist on the poet), Pushkin's texts encompass "all Russian codes, all the beliefs of Russians about nature, the state and divine providence" (294).

However, Lemekhov's political ambitions, as one might have suspected, offend the acting president of the Russian Federation. Lemekhov falls into disgrace, losing his job, his privileges, his possessions, and the support of his loved ones. Dispossessed, he wanders Russia's vast landscapes until the novel's final pages, when he is rehabilitated and summoned back to Moscow. His assistance is needed in actions that will, according to the president, change Russia's role in the world. In one of Prokhanov's trademark epiphany scenes, Lemekhov feels a premonition of his country's radiant future, a vision tagged with the "wonderful word 'Crimea'" (382). The employment in the book of "Crimea" as a transcendental marker for the end of post-Soviet drift and for personal *and* national revival fits neatly with Prokhanov's view, which he has repeated publically, that the annexation of Crimea inaugurated the long-awaited miracle of Russia's restoration as an empire.

Crimea is an (extreme) example of a wider recent trend where prominent and, as in Prokhanov's case, highly controversial Russian writers adopt politically engaged stances and insert themselves into debates about national destiny. More specifically, *Crimea* embodies a cultural mood and a literary tendency already ascendant during the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the new millennium. This neo-imperialist literary fashion combines an emphasis on post-Soviet national humiliation and the tragic dissolution of former frameworks of collective belonging with a quixotic commitment to the prospect of a restored, triumphant, and autocratically ruled Russian Empire.

This recent upsurge of nationalist engagement by Russian literary figures, of course, taps into a Russian tradition of exalting writers as intellectuals uniquely equipped to speak out on weighty social issues. Imaginative fiction, indeed, served as a privileged medium for social and political debate in nineteenth-century Russia, when the lack of democratic institutions such as a parliament and a free press helped push intellectual exchange into the realm of culture and above all literature. The multilayered qualities of literary language could articulate ideas that had no forum within official culture. Aesopian language allowed authors to communicate, innocently it seemed, dissenting or forbidden ideas to a select, well-educated intellectual public, who were often sensitive to not only aesthetic quality but also subversive undertones.

Writers' involvement in almost everything of national concern went hand in hand with a popular veneration of authors and their works that may seem inflated to the Western observer. It also shouldered the writer

with a sense of responsibility. Alexander Pushkin in the 1820s and 1830s could still vigorously defend the autonomy of art, but by the second half of the nineteenth century, it was widely deemed irresponsible to insist that literature should concern itself with merely aesthetic matters. Democratic-revolutionary writers and critics such as Dmitrii Pisarev and Nikolai Chernyshevskii put forth the influential and increasingly accepted notion that the author was someone morally obliged—if not bound by sacred duty—to work for democratic reforms and social justice (Pipes 249–80).

Literature's traditional prestige was perpetuated and exploited when writers—"engineers of the human soul," in Stalin's famous dictum—were given a firmly established, and highly controlled, role in the Soviet project. The status of socialist realism as the only authorized literary style, the persecution of (political and aesthetic) dissidents, the social and financial privileges enjoyed by members of the Writers' Union: these developments testify to the authorities' deep-rooted intuition about the life-guiding *and* subversive potentials of poetry and imaginative prose.

But the demise of communism seemed to put a decisive end to Russia's "literaturocentricism" (Berg 23). In the 1990s, critics and writers, even those who had enthusiastically welcomed the end of the regime, routinely lamented the corrosive effects of political and economic reforms on Russian letters. The writer's Soviet-era pedestal had been shattered by liberalization and commercialization, and without vast ideological projects to support—or an oppressive state to dissent against—literature could now seem socially unnecessary (Wachtel 168). Notwithstanding these developments and the growing prominence of film, digital media, and other modes of expression, literature has managed to retain some of its traditional prestige. Today, it remains a strikingly important forum for discussions of vexed social and political issues, including concerns about Russia's identity and destiny. Also, classic writers still serve as important compass points in social debate. That Prokhanov can present Pushkin's texts as expressions of primordial Russian values, and even as inspiration for twenty-first-century political agendas, suggests that elements of literaturocentrism are currently alive and well.

Literary critics, for their part, were often amazed at the turn of the century to discover this new, politically committed literature, of which Prokhanov's novels are a vivid example. In 2001, one commentator observed that writers increasingly aligned themselves with the confident and authoritative tone of the freshly installed Putin government. "A frigid

breeze, blowing from the Kremlin towers," he wrote, "has reddened the noses of tireless pen-pushers and covered their moustaches in frost" (Prigodich, "Pervyi roman"). Others detected a fascination with Russian might and empire. The journalist Sergei Kniazev noted that "the last year of the previous millennium and the first months of the new one have been marked by the publication of quite a few outstanding literary works at once […]. And what's interesting is that almost every one of them turned out to be about the Empire—they were all, to a certain extent, imperial novels" ("Toska").

Indeed, the works of the early Putin era to draw the most frantic public responses were those offering a Russian state of glory and unity, untainted by the humiliation of the postcommunist crisis and embodying a victorious Russian Empire of either the idealized past or the breathlessly anticipated future. The empire—often ruled by a modern tsar or a revived or rehabilitated ruler from the past—typically functioned as a shorthand for fantasies about the coherence of Russian space and history, and for ideas about Russian culture's fundamental deviations from the liberal traditions of "the West." This diverse and multifaceted trend—soon labeled "neo-imperialist" literature by reviewers—was closely tied up with similar tendencies in visual art and with the rising popularity of the "neo-Eurasianist" philosophies of, among others, Alexander Dugin.

Growing public enthusiasm for Russia's supposed imperial greatness, and the concomitant elevation of the Soviet experience to "an organic part of the historical past of Russian statehood and national tradition" (Kalinin 158), have prompted some scholars to dismiss the label "post-Soviet" as a proper characterization of Russia under Putin. Kevin Platt reminds us that over the past several years, popular opinion has increasingly been drawn to "figures of political authority and national greatness" ("The Post-Soviet" 8); "visions of political and institutional continuity" are ubiquitous ("The Post-Soviet" 6); and, in contrast to the rampant anti-Soviet sentiments of the (early) 1990s, "[i]n dominant public discourse and common parlance in Russia today, the Russian Federation is typically conceived as heir to the greatness and cultural riches of the Soviet era" ("Russian Empire" 463). In light of these shifting orientations, but also in the context of the country's reemergence as a confident player in the global political arena, Platt submits that "the post-Soviet era, such as it was, is now emphatically over" ("The Post-Soviet" 2). My study sets out to investigate the intricate refractions of the developments flagged by Platt in recent Russian imaginative prose. I retain, however, the label "post-Soviet," partly because of

the lack of a better term, partly because of this book's contention that even the early twenty-first-century rejection of post-Soviet self-doubt and its feelings of humiliation are infused with a sense of loss and disorientation wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recent neo-imperialist tendencies in Russian literature constitute a particular cultural response to this event and its understanding benefits from their being considered as a "post-Soviet" phenomenon.

In literature, neo-imperialist approaches have begun to outshine the relativist and postmodernist engagements with national identity that had dominated the literary field immediately after perestroika. In many best-selling prose works from the late 1980s and early 1990s, a markedly postmodernist proclivity had supplanted the traditional role of the Russian writer as a primary "nation builder," or as a spiritual guide who teaches readers who they are and how they should live. Here, the confusion wrought by the rapid dissolution of old modes of collective existence typically dovetailed with games and experimentation. Some of the most celebrated stories and novels from this period presented Russia as nothing more than a cultural void between East and West; as a purely linguistic or discursive phenomenon without an ontological foundation; as a computer-generated simulacrum of a modern Western society; or as a culture undermined by the "black holes" of an atrocious, but hardly known past. These writers championed ironic attitudes toward the moralizing and life-guiding aura of Russian literature. But they also routinely deconstructed the clichéd literary tropes of national identity, along with the grand narratives of communist and liberal–capitalist ideology. Rather than contemplating surrogate ideologies and new identitarian frames, popular postmodernist writers in the 1990s brought into the limelight the disillusioned and fragmentized worldview of post-Soviet Russians, who no longer could, nor should, conceive of their collective identity in serious and unequivocal terms.

These postmodernist approaches eventually burned themselves out, as can be seen in the controversy around another of Prokhanov's works, the novel *Mister Hexogen* [*Gospodin geksogen*] (2002). In the 1990s, Prokhanov had been better known for his newspaper *The Day* (later *Tomorrow*) than for his books. This weekly paper, with Prokhanov as editor-in-chief (a post he still holds), professed a brand of patriotism whose admixture of Orthodox-inspired spirituality, antiliberal and anti-Semitic rhetoric, and Stalinist nostalgia was particularly welcome among an elderly audience who felt betrayed by the reforms of the 1990s. Prokhanov's reading

public, however, grew exponentially in 2002, when *Mister Hexogen* was published by Ad Marginem. This publisher was known for its postmodernist taste and of its publication of Vladimir Sorokin's pastiches of naïve patriotic and socialist–realist prose.

The publication of Prokhanov's novel by Ad Marginem led to conflicting interpretations. Several critics proposed that the book be read as an entertaining "deconstruction" of nationalist pulp writing. Such a reading outraged others, who warned that Prokhanov's poor writing style and unconventional imagery should not be mistaken for postmodernist experimentation, and that his rabid chauvinism was worlds away from postmodern relativism. The director of Ad Marginem, Alexander Ivanov, fanned the flames higher when he declared in an interview that Prokhanov's neo-Stalinist sympathies presented a welcome change to the excessive anticommunist impulse in post-Soviet literature (Aleksandrov, "Prokhanov").

The debate reached a boiling point when Prokhanov's novel received the prestigious National Bestseller Prize. As often with literary controversies, the affair itself guaranteed the success of the book and its author, who today is a well-known public figure and a frequent political commentator and presenter on various talk shows, on both radio and television. When I interviewed him in 2009, Prokhanov proclaimed that he did not see any contradiction between the profile of Ad Marginem and his own aesthetic orientation. His political views were ultraconservative, but his aesthetics, he emphasized, had always had an avant-garde impetus. Furthermore, he was a great admirer of Sorokin's prose, and while he felt that Sorokin belonged to a different strand in Russian literature, he admitted that he might have been, unconsciously, influenced by his postmodernist style (personal communication, November 3, 2009).

The affair points up important changes in Russian literature, and its relation to both the postmodern paradigm and the post-Soviet condition. It is a key contention of this book that the study of Russian nationalist discourses (in literature and elsewhere) should include a careful analysis of how postmodern tropes and styles have recently been discarded *and* recycled in favor of sweeping doctrines of collective belonging. The militant fascination in recent Russian literature with Russia as an empire has been stirred not only by political developments. Neo-imperialist authors do not simply sing the praises of the Putin government; "a frigid wind blowing from the Kremlin Towers" does not suffice to explain their stances. The fanatical recent obsession with Russian identity and mission stems, at

least in part, from a profound fatigue with the postmodern relativism and political aloofness of the most prominent novels and stories of the 1990s.

To grasp the full import of this tectonic shift in the way Russian writers engage with Russian identity, I have adopted a two-pronged approach. Part I demonstrates how, in the 1990s, writers such as Vladimir Sorokin and the immensely popular Viktor Pelevin fashionably depicted post-Soviet chaos and disorientation in a markedly postmodernist style. The second part contrasts the approach of these and other postmodernists with successful authors from the Putin era. Though familiar with postmodern thought and aesthetics, and sometimes openly referring to the work of Pelevin and Sorokin, these writers—among them Alexander Prokhanov, Pavel Krusanov, Dmitrii Bykov, and Eduard Limonov—moved beyond post-Soviet and postmodern skepticism. Aesthetically and politically, they may belong to different movements and camps, but these authors have all fervently committed themselves to the idea that the Russian community finds its natural home in a vast continental empire, and that the traditions of Russian culture are fundamentally incompatible with the democratic and capitalist values of "the West."

The reader will notice that most of the authors discussed in this study are men. An exception is Tat'iana Tolstaia, whose intricate reflections in *The Slynx* [*Kys'*] (2001) on the distorted rhythms of Russian history are addressed in Chap. 2. While the proportion of women among Russia's most prestigious literary figures is relatively small, literature in Russia today is by no means exclusively a male affair. Since the 1980s, various female writers have taken center stage in the literary field, and today, celebrated Russian authors such as Tolstaia, Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Liudmila Ulitskaia, and, more recently, Ol'ga Slavnikova have won major literary prizes at home and gained considerable recognition abroad. If the selection of writers analyzed here is not a representative cross section of the entire contemporary Russian literary field, this is because the books that have left the deepest imprints on recent debates about Russian identity have been written by men. This lopsided gender division among writers engaged with "the Russian question" testifies, at least in part, to the persistence of a (Soviet) Russian cultural tradition that attributes the authoritative roles of "nation builder" and enunciator of "big ideas" almost exclusively to male writers, while leaving more mundane (and politically less significant) topics to be taken up by their female counterparts (Wachtel 5; Goscilo and Lanoux 19). Scholars have pointed out that the overrepresentation of male authors in literary reflections on the nation's character and fate

also partakes of a persistent cultural mythology that allegorically endows the Russian nation with female qualities, while imaginatively reserving the role of her committed (though rivaling) benefactors for the state's male representatives or the men of the intelligentsia.[1]

Before turning to the methods suited for the analysis of the literary developments analyzed in this study, we must review the key ingredients of post-Soviet uncertainty about national identity. In the journalism, art, and politics of the 1990s, debates on collective identity encompassed a wide range of topics: Russians' supposed irrationality, for example, their alleged cultural aversion to materialism and proclivity for spirituality, or their Orthodox-inspired inclination toward communality. But these debates pivoted on, and were spurred by, several larger, fundamental problems of self-definition, some of which have tormented intellectuals and nation-builders since at least the nineteenth century: the traditionally awkward imbrication of nation and empire in Russia; the peripheral position of Russian culture vis-à-vis a soi-disant progressive, civilized West; and the country's disruptive modern history, which in the post-Soviet period often seemed to resist a unified plot of national development.

As the wave of "national awakenings" washed over the dynastic polities of nineteenth-century Europe, the difference between the Russian nation and its multiethnic, dynastic empire was not always easy to discern. Centuries of overland expansion had resulted in a profound geographical continuity between the center and the periphery of the realm, making it often impossible to tell where the boundaries between "homeland" and "colony" should be drawn, or, as Roman Szporluk aptly puts it, "where 'Russia proper' ended and where 'Empire' began" (71). This overlapping—often in ambiguous and inconsistent ways—of nation and empire was not a mere product of geography. In the nineteenth century, the tsarist government pursued policies that sought to imbue the polyglot and multiconfessional empire with the modern allure of a nation-state.

Best known is the successful proposal in 1833 by Count Sergei Uvarov, soon to be minister of education, to promote "autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality [*national' nost'*]" as the key principles of the Russian Empire. The inclusion of *national' nost'* (which means both "nationality" and "ethnicity") among more traditional points of orientation was meant to take the wind out of the sails of emergent national movements, which increasingly sought to locate Russian identity not in the institutions of the church and the (autocratic) state but in the language, culture, and folklore of Russia's most oppressed social caste, the peasantry

(Kappeler 198–201). Uvarov's formula thus expressed an uncomfortable compromise between official patriotism and ethnic nationalism. It attempted, in Benedict Anderson's formulation, to imaginatively "stretch […] the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire" (86).

The Soviet Union in many respects inherited this ambiguous fusion of nation and empire. Although officially the republics were sovereign Soviet–socialist states voluntarily united in a federation, Soviet power gradually consolidated the non-Russian areas into political and economic domains that were highly centralized and largely dominated by ethnic Russians. This hegemony, together with the strong ideological, even messianic drive inherent in the Soviet project, and the fact that the Soviet Union continued to manifest the geographical contours of tsarist Russia, has led many scholars to the conclusion that the Soviet Union, after its formal constitution in 1922, was a restored Russian Empire.[2]

After decades of considering themselves to be members of the dominant people in a multiethnic polity, Russians in 1991 suddenly found themselves in a postimperial state. They had to make, in Gregory Freidin's metaphor, the cultural and political transition from "Romans into Italians" (241). But in post-Soviet Russia, politicians and citizens regularly wondered what Russia was without its empire. What could a new Russian identity possibly be based on? Should it be defined according to cultural or racial principles? Or could it be construed on standards of citizenship (loyalty to the constitution and the institutions of the state), or on linguistic criteria (Russia as a community of Russian speakers) (Tolz, "Forging the Nation"; "Conflicting 'Homeland Myths'")?

What complicated the situation was that Russia—although it contracted in 1991 to its smallest size in 200 years—was still a "*Vielvölkerreich*" (Kappeler), in which people and "nation" (if that be the proper label for the new Russia) were not always congruous: large non-Russian minorities lived in the Russian Federation, and millions of Russians (and speakers of Russian), having been dispersed throughout the Soviet Union, now found themselves outside the borders of the Russian Federation, in what was habitually termed "the near abroad" [*blizhnee zarubezh'e*]. The current crisis in Ukraine testifies to the explosive potential of this legacy of a "near abroad," especially in regions where Russians live in relatively condensed communities with long and intensive historical bonds with "Russia proper." The Putin government, it seems, has now found effective ways to mobilize the discontent of these populations so as to extend its territory

and enhance its influence abroad. The annexation of Crimea, backed up by a referendum and presented by President Putin as the region's historically legitimate return to its "home harbor, to the native shores" (qtd. in Myers and Barry, "Putin"), shows the political weight of a discourse that portrays Russians living abroad as willing members of the Russian nation. But even these recent developments cannot obscure the unresolved tension between Russian nation and empire. The annexation of Crimea, but also the conflict in the Donbass area, more than any event of the last several decades, raises the unsettled question of Russia's natural or legitimate size and sphere of influence.

Post-Soviet discussions about "Russianness" also pivoted around problems of historical continuity. Scholars of "the nation" have famously suggested that national identities depend on "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm), on narratives of (forgotten, but retrieved) historical continuity (Anderson 205), or on a sense of sameness over time and space (Gillis 3). In this light, the difficulties in reimagining a cultural identity in postcommunist Russia stand out. How to construct stories of "identity" in a place that experienced, in the twentieth century alone, several transformations of its cultural and political self-definition? Moreover, if Russians learned anything from the opening of the archives and the publication of formerly unpublishable texts during the last years of perestroika, it was that their history was full of ugly episodes and that Soviet historiography had profoundly distorted the past, leaving whole parts of Russian history befogged.

Stanislav Govorukhin's documentary film *The Russia We Have Lost* [*Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*] (1992) is characteristic of the insecurities over history during the transition period. Produced immediately after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the film contrasts footage displaying tsarist Russia's supposed grandeur, greatness, and wealth with images of postcommunist poverty, decaying provincial towns, and public drunkenness. This technique emphasizes the disastrous legacy of Sovietism. But the film also stressed Russians' alarming lack of historical knowledge. A voice-over opens the film with the dramatic claim that "we do not know anything about . . . is the topic of this film" (*Rossiia*). That is probably why we live in ignorance and hardship. Where can we find the path toward revival? People without clan and tribe, without roots and parents, without a past and historical experience will never set out on that path. That is the reason why we may have to recall who we are, who our parents are, what our mother Russia actually is. That is the topic of this film (*Rossiia*).

The Russia We Have Lost revels in the sensational historical revelations that could be heard, read, and seen everywhere in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The film documents, to mention only a few examples, the Bolshevists' destruction of the tsarist empire's flourishing economy, the gruesome details of the Bolshevists' cold-blooded murder of the tsarist family, the massive robbery of the nobility, the horrors of collectivization, and the devastating environmental damage caused by 70 years of Soviet rule. Such denunciations and disclosures of past atrocities and corruptions, and the concomitant denunciation of everything Soviet, however, soon became banal routine. Post-Soviet citizens often seemed to be shielded from more profound analyses of Soviet crimes and potentially unsettling questions about collective responsibility.

Closely tied up with Russia's uncomfortable *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was the increasing acclamation, both among the population and in official culture, of episodes and symbols from the Soviet past. Whereas in 1989, every aspect of Soviet history was being scrutinized, and anti-Stalinist and anti-Leninist interpretations dominated historical discourses (Smith 3), already by the end of the 1990s, myths about a strong and flourishing Soviet state enjoyed growing popularity. New, disturbingly positive views of the Stalin era found their way into Russian schoolbooks and teachers' manuals. These stressed Stalin's achievements as an admirably efficient modernizer and a brilliant military strategist, and presented political purges and forced labor as tragic, yet unavoidable side effects of his rule.

References to Soviet glory and grandeur now permeate contemporary politics, as the Putin government has repeatedly attempted to create symbolic continuities with Soviet power.[3] Emblematic are the reinstitution of the Soviet national anthem (with new words) in 2000, and the restoration of Stalin's name and portrait in official commemorations and memorials for World War II. Already in December 2000, we saw President Putin celebrating people and episodes from the Soviet past, when he wondered publically if there was "really nothing to commemorate from the Soviet period of our country except Stalin's camps and repressions? Then what to do with Dunaevskii, Sholokhov, Shostakovich, Korolëv and our achievements in space? What to do with the flight of Yurii Gagarin?" (Putin, "Zaiavlenie" 56).

Recently, this celebration of Soviet achievements reached an apotheosis in the opening ceremonies of the 2014 Olympic Winter Games in Sochi. The historical pageant mounted for the event was a roller coaster ride through centuries of Russian history, a spectacle of historical reenactment

that drew on Russian music, ballet, and theater to bring to life major milestones in Russian history. Scenes from the Russian Revolution were glorified against the backdrop of colossal set pieces inspired by the art of Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Malevich. Cheerful pioneers and workers represented the period of the Industrialization. The show depicted the 1960s as an era of Soviet hipsters and fashionistas, an obvious reference to Valerii Todorovskii's popular (and profoundly unhistorical) musical film *Hipsters* [*Stiliagi*] (2008). Scenes, however, that would prevent the seamless incorporation of Soviet splendor into this carefully choreographed national myth—references to the rocky post-Soviet transition, for instance—were simply omitted. This transition, for Putin, it seemed, was to be swept away dismissively, if mentioned at all. In 2005, he already asserted in his annual address to parliament that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Putin, "Poslanie" 272). While the word "geopolitical" left open the possibility of other, even vaster twentieth-century disasters, Putin has never made equally decisive statements about the "catastrophe" of Soviet executions and deportations, or its other crimes of repression and corruption.

The Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, of course, has a central place in official remembrance and cultural memory and continues to shape post-Soviet ideas about identity and collective belonging. Its central significance in state-sponsored media and memory projects in recent years has helped concentrate the collective memory of the multifaceted Soviet experience around one congratulatory focal point. Various historians and sociologists have pointed out that the outsized remembrance of World War II, moreover, has smoothed over the less heroic aspects of the Soviet era. Opinion polls, indeed, indicate that Stalinist repression has lost its significance for contemporary Russians, while the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War is increasingly considered to be the most important event of the last century (Dubin, "Pamiat'").

In Russian politics and in the nation's state-sponsored media, World War II has been used to construct new definitions of "us" and "them" and even to legitimize political and military decisions. Even a cursory glance at Russian television coverage of the current conflict in Ukraine reveals the omnipresent use of symbols, stories, and explanatory paradigms related to the "Great Patriotic War": Russian media habitually refer to the new regime in Kiev as "fascists"; the Gazprom-owned channel NTV recently showed fragments from Mikhail Romm's *Triumph over Violence* [*Obyknovennyi Fashizm*] (1965) to illuminate what was going on