

**Martin C.
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**Rus
Ukraine
Russia**

Scenes from the Cultural
History of Russian Religiosity

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CONCLUSION

New Struggles Over Old Rus

In Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and across the entire territory of the former empire, the present begins with the collapse of communist regimes at the end of the 1980s. The carapace of the old order cracked, and out emerged something which was new—again, one is tempted to adopt Spengler’s notion of pseudomorphosis (Scene 4). The carapace cracked; it happened officially in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union. As far as the spiritual history of the period is concerned, however, the central question is rather how something old appeared amidst the new—those old Russes which have alternated throughout history and throughout the pages of this book.

The “new” was itself in large part the return of the “something older,” something pre-communist, and hence something Christian. In 1987, official Soviet journals debated the character of Jesus in Aitmatov’s *The Place of the Skull*. In 1988, under the regime’s benevolent patronage, a sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church was summoned in the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius. The gathering marked the millennium of Christianity in Russia by canonizing figures of historical and cultural significance, not just from across centuries but also from across spiritual traditions: Andrei Rublev and Dmitry Donskoy from Mongolian-Muscovite Rus (Scene 5); Maxim the Greek from Moscow’s spiritual counter-culture (Scene 7); Xenia of Saint Petersburg from the Petersburg era (Scene 11); representing the Orthodox restoration (Scene 15) were Ignatius Bryanchaninov, Theophan Zatvornik, and Ambrose Grenkov of Optina, the spiritual father of many writers, and through his presence Orthodox romanticism (Scene 16) was included at least by proxy. And in 1989 the magazine *Novy Mir* printed that most anti-regime book by any of the anti-regime authors—Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*

(Scene 19). With that, the gradual process of dismantling the censorship of religious thought reached its highpoint.

All the spiritual traditions of all the old Russes returned to public discourse: the Orthodox reformist tradition of Alexander Men's disciples and ultrarestitutionist circles reading the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Shafarevich's *Russophobia*; traditions of the Old Believers; the Russian-Catholic; the Uniate or Greek-Catholic; the Protestant; the Zionist; the Islamic; the Buddhist; the esoteric; the nonorthodox Marxist; the nonorthodox atheist; the "anti-Muscovite" Ukrainian and Belarusian traditions; not to mention traditions of the non-Slavic nations, all of them wanting out of the empire.⁴²⁹

Postmodern literature provided an artistic response to the "great opening" that took place at the turn of the 1990s. Postmodernism treats all traditions as so many "texts" to be quoted, combined, or parodied according to whim or artistic intent.⁴³⁰ The novel *Marina's Thirtieth Love* by the Moscow conceptualist Vladimir Sorokin (*1955) may be regarded as the period's emblematic work. Though composed in 1982–1984, deep in the years of samizdat, the book did not appear in print until 1995—but when it did, it seemed to have been written specifically for the new era. The novel successively paraphrases each of twentieth-century Russia's grand ideological "ways of speaking," or discourses: Orthodox romanticism and its discourse of conversion; the civil-heroic discourse of dissent; the nebulous rambling of esoteric discourse (in which concepts from the work of Nicholas Roerich make an appearance, Scene 3); and the dull, dehumanized rhetoric of the communist regime. All the discourses, however, are reduced to a shared plane of "nothing but discourse" by being incorporated into sexualized and obdurately

429 Cf. Matti Kotiranta, ed., *Religious Transition in Russia* (Helsinki: Kikumora Publications, 2000).

430 Cf. Hana Řehulková, "Postsovětská postmoderna: Sorokin, Akunin, Pelevin," *Host* 30, no. 4 (2014): 41–43.

(pseudo-)pornographic descriptions of the heroine's experiences. Harsh parody is reserved for effusive Russian patriotism, in which Rus herself is worshipped as the central deity:

"Rus..." whispered Marina and suddenly understood something that was of immense significance for her.

"BUT NOT THAT RUS, NOT THAT ONE!!!" the critical voice continues.

"HEAVENLY RUS!"

Her palm began to pale and turn blue, the outlines of rivers, mountains, and lakes contracted and expanded, gradually filling up the entire sky, and shined through the aperture of limply clenched fingers, inside flared a blinding white star: Moscow! The star transformed into a cross and there sounded from somewhere beneath the firmament the dense, deep bass of the protodeacon of Volkhov:

Alexander full of gloooooory,

Who since tender youth has Christ adooooored,

And the lightest of his burdens diiid reeeeeiive

And by many miracles God has celebrated yooooou.

Prey for the salvation of ouuur soooooouls!⁴³¹

This mystical apparition, surprising Marina in her dreams after an evening of revelry, instructs her about her duty to fight on behalf of Rus, a Rus suffering through a process of spiritual rebirth in the Gulag. "Alexander full of glory"—that's none other than Alexander Solzhenitsyn...

Sorokin's work is harsh, "blasphemous," and, to many readers, scandalous. It indicates the "zero point" that had been reached by Russia in the 1990s, a situation of openness, true religious freedom, and cultural and political choice—something hitherto unknown in Russian society. It signals a "window of opportunity" in which anything was possible.

431 Vladimir Sorokin, *Třicátá Marinina láska* (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1995), 171.

In theory, at least.

In practice, the situation provided artists and intellectuals an opportunity to discuss anything, to put everything into word and image—but it also forced them to confront the fact that the non-elite public cared less and less. It provided the church with all its venerable traditions an opportunity to confront a new world of diverse opinions and competing viewpoints—and once again to pose the old question, what to do about it? Whether to proceed down the path of reform, or to push for restoration and home for the arrival of a new romanticism? It also represented an opportunity for democratic politicians to realize how weak “western” political culture—with its political parties, elections, programs, and arguments—truly was in Russia. And not least, it provided power-holders from the communist regime an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to adapt to new conditions.

A new current emerged with the openness of the 1990s, one that grabbed hold of government and society during the 2000s by combining in a distinctive way discourses that until recently had seemed incompatible. This was no longer the non-binding, literary game of Sorokin, however; it was a game of politics and power. In this game, Orthodoxy in its conservative, Muscovite-restorationist form (Scene 6) combined with post-communist structures and other ideological trends: the Eurasianist appeal to Moscow’s Asiatic roots in the tradition of Lev Gumilev (Scene 5), the esoteric invocation of Russia’s pagan antiquity in the spirit of Nicholas Roerich (Scene 3), the anti-Semitic exorcizing of Jewishness and all other marks of “alterity” (Scene 13), the pan-Slavic excoriation of a decadent Europe along the lines of Danilevsky and Leontiev (Scene 16), but also the Orthodox-romantic celebration of spiritual transformation and a return to Christ offered by the Gulag in the manner of Alexander Solzhenitsyn (Scene 19). Even Shiryaev’s theme of continuity between the two historical guises of Solovetsky was connected to this structure—though with an appalling shift of emphasis. Zakhar Prilepin (*1975), quite the distinctive author, member of

the National Bolshevik Party, and Putin's opponent on the right, set his novel *Obitel'* (Abode, 2014) on the premise that the monastery and the labor camp were both in fact positive—positive because they were “ours,” because they were Russian...

What do all these trends have in common? Rus, of course—that same Rus that appeared to Sorokin's Marina in her sleep. Each one will set aside differences in the common interest—in the interest of Russian nationalism; of dislodging “western” liberalism and democratic openness; of again constructing society along authoritarian lines and creating a Russian imperium that would be respected, and feared, abroad.⁴³² Today, in the early twenty-first century, this alliance is headed by Vladimir Putin, longtime agent of the KGB, and by the Moscow Patriarch Kirill Gundyayev, a long-time collaborator of the same secret service. Gathered around them are not only the practitioners of power, but also the theoreticians of this new nationalism. The political scientist Alexandr Dugin (*1962), for example, continues to develop the old idea of Eurasianism in a sharply anti-European spirit.

We can turn again to the work of Vladimir Sorokin for an artistic reflection on this unexpected alliance, this time to his novel *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006). The word “oprichnik” in the title is historical and refers to Ivan the Terrible's corps of servants, the *oprichniki*, gendarmes or political police who terrorized society and stood above the law (Scene 6). But the story is not set in the past; it takes place in the future, the year 2028. A new tsar rules over Russia and the world is again divided by an iron curtain. The plot concerns an “ordinary day” in the life of a modern oprichnik for whom murder, torture, and rape all belong to a day's normal routine as much as do the rituals of Orthodoxy or the ideological blathering about the spiritual significance of the absurd cruelty:

432 Cf. Peter J. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Now you, my dear Enochs, you're wondering, why was the Wall built, why are we fenced off, why did we burn our foreign passports, [...] why were intelligent machines changed to Cyrillic? To increase profits? To maintain order? For entertainment? For home and hearth? [...] Now you see, my dearest Enochs, that's not what it was for. It was so the Christian faith would be preserved like a chaste treasure, you get it? For only we, the Orthodox, have preserved the church as Christ's body on earth.⁴³³

The reference to “an ordinary day” in Sorokin's anti-utopia, moreover, bitterly parodies yet another classic work: Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the description of a single “ordinary day” of a prisoner in the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn is not only a literary giant standing somewhere on the horizon of “celestial Rus,” he himself actively engaged in current debates and questions. Here, however, we are dealing with a different Solzhenitsyn. This Solzhenitsyn attempts in his history of Russian-Jewish relations, *Two Hundred Years Together* (Scene 13), to absolve Rus from accusations of anti-Semitism by emphasizing the Jewish contribution to the revolution.⁴³⁴ It is this other Solzhenitsyn who, in his cycle of novels *The Red Wheel* (*Krasnoje koleso*, 1971–1991), attempts to understand the causes of the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik putsch. He constructs something like an iconostasis of Russian society from dozens of heroes drawn from every walk of life. Though so deeply mired in the breadth of motifs and events that the novel eventually unravels in his hands, he nevertheless manages clearly to communicate the main point of his analysis: democracy was introduced too quickly and, as a result, was too weak to maintain itself and to guide society. Russian democracy consequently entered a deep crisis. Rather than

433 Vladimir Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

434 Regarding the complicated evolution of Solzhenitsyn's earlier stance on the Russia-Jewish question, see Martin C. Putna, “Alexandr Solženicyň a Židé,” *Světová literatura* 38, no. 5 (1992): 72–77.

the automatic introduction of electoral democracy and party politics, what was needed was a moderately authoritarian government, enlightened administrators capable of guiding the country toward democracy while preserving Russian identity.

In *The Red Wheel* Solzhenitsyn points to one person who might have led such a transition—Peter Stolypin (1862–1911), who became prime minister in 1906 after the revolution. Unfortunately, Stolypin was murdered by the Jewish revolutionary Dmitri Bogrov (1887–1911). The anti-Semitic undertone of the analysis cannot be missed. Shortly before his death, Solzhenitsyn revealed who he considered to be the “new Stolypin,” a person who would lead Russia from the infirmities of a democratic order which the country had carelessly stumbled into after the fall of communism, just like after the fall of tsarism. The man he pointed to was Vladimir Putin. Solzhenitsyn thus made possible his own insertion into the iconostasis of the new regime—deeply disappointing those who saw in him an uncompromising defender of human freedom; providing bitter satisfaction to those who, since his *Harvard Lectures* in the 1970s, had warned about the limits of Solzhenitsyn’s defense of freedom,⁴³⁵ and giving sweet satisfaction to western Christian conservatives and ultraconservatives on the Right who welcomed him as a comrade-in-arms in introducing authoritarian systems into the West.⁴³⁶

Putin’s cunning and unscrupulous rise to power, his steady ex-purgation of democracy, and alliances with the Orthodox hierarchy and conservative nationalist intellectuals has already been the

435 Cf. John B. Dunlop, Richard S. Haugh, and Michael Nicholson, eds., *Solzhenitsyn in Exile: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985)

436 Compare, for example, with books by leading figures of the Christian conservative scene in the U.S.: Edward E. Ericson, Jr., *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1993); Cf. Joseph Pearce, *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999); Cf. Daniel J. Mahoney, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Ascent from Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

object of analysis.⁴³⁷ Putin's machinery of power and propaganda has enveloped Russia in an atmosphere of neo-Soviet timelessness that has often proven well suited to rulers of his type. This timelessness differs from that of the late-Soviet period in one important respect: it manages to secure consumption. Moscow under Putin is not the Moscow of the Brezhnev era. High-speed rail lines lead from the Sheremetyevo Airport to downtown. There are shops and restaurants, bookstores and nightclubs to the heart's content. Some shopkeepers and waiters have even learned to smile at their guests. One can find any title from any literary genre—if it is not available at the store, it can be ordered online. There are newly renovated Orthodox churches with well-attended services. For a church which is loyal to the state and receives privileges from the state “satisfies religious needs,” or put differently, it provides spiritual consumption.⁴³⁸ Among these superficial shifts toward western norms belong other conveniences; visitors to the Tretyakov Gallery, for example, are no longer required to wear plastic bags over their shoes.

But then there are the words uttered by Satan to Jesus in the desert, confronting him with all the riches of the world, words interpreted anew by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* and Solovjov in *The Legend of the Antichrist*: “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me” (Mt 4.9). I'll give you the advantages of a western lifestyle (if you can afford it, but that's your problem) if you remain loyal to me, the almighty tsar—just don't demand real freedom and democracy.

Of course, some have organized resistance to the restoration of the authoritarian regime. The less this is possible through politics, the more emphasis must fall on the cultural and the spiritual. This has often been the case in Russian history, as in the letters of Kurbsky to

437 Cf. Edward Lucas, *Nová studená válka aneb Jak Kreml ohrožuje Rusko i Západ* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 2008).

438 Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Ivan the Terrible (Scene 6), Radishchev's *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (Scene 11), and Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.

As far as culture is concerned, the methods of today's regime differ ostensibly from those of the past. Today one can write books about whomever and whatever one wants. But that is because Putin's regime recognizes that books matter much less than they did in the time of Radishchev or Solzhenitsyn. Because it recognizes that mass media, rapid newsfeeds, and images are of much greater significance. In its attempt to control public space, Putin's regime is just as uncompromising as the tsars and Soviets were before it. Authors are usually left alive, although journalists sometimes mysteriously disappear. The publishers of books are usually left alive, but free radio is controlled and in general repressed, to say nothing about television. One may speak relatively freely about the past, but not about the present.

It is in this context that one must understand the phenomenon of Pussy Riot. Formed in 2011, the group organized several political happenings wearing their colorful balaclavas. But they became most famous for a short anti-Putin concert in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a performance immediately halted by the cathedral's security. A gigantic structure on the bank of the Moscow River, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was not a randomly chosen location. The building forms one of the most central visual symbols of the restoration of a "sacred Rus." It is not a vestige of the Middle Ages, but a romantic, historicizing restoration project of the late nineteenth century (consecrated in 1882). Demolished in 1931 during one of Stalin's the anti-religious campaigns, the cathedral was rebuilt after the regime's fall. It was there, in 2000, that the Romanovs were canonized, an extremely controversial event at the time. While it is true that the Bolsheviks murdered Nicholas and his wife, it is also true that their incompetence and ruinous mistakes (blind faith in Rasputin!) drove Russia to the edge of catastrophe and prepared the ground for the Bolshevik seizure of power. Before that, in 1981, the

tsar's family had been canonized in exile by the Restoration Russian Orthodox Church Abroad as a sign of opposition to the communist regime. Now they were being canonized as "passion bearers"—the same category to which belong the sainted Kievan princes Boris and Gleb (Scene 4)—an ostentatious act of national consensus and under the sign of an imperial lineage that stretches from the tsars to the Bolsheviks to the current regime of Vladimir Putin.

At a time when Putin was suppressing peaceful demonstrations, the group Pussy Riot stood in the cathedral and sang the "Punk Prayer":

Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin, banish Putin,
Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish him, we pray thee!

Congregations genuflect,
Black robes brag gilt epaulettes,
Freedom's phantom's gone to heaven,
Gay Pride's chained and in detention.
KGB's chief saint descends
To guide the punks to prison vans.

Don't upset His Saintship, ladies,
Stick to making love and babies.
Crap, crap, this godliness crap!
crap, crap, this holiness crap!

Virgin Mary, Mother of God.
Be a feminist, we pray thee,
Be a feminist, we pray thee.

Bless our festering bastard-boss.
Let black cars parade the Cross.
The Missionary's in class for cash.
Meet him there, and pay his stash.

Patriarch Gundy believes in Putin.
Better believe in God, you vermin!
Fight for rights, forget the rite –
Join our protest, Holy Virgin.⁴³⁹

Immediately arrested and subsequently sentenced, Pussy Riot united world opinion but divided opinion at home. Supporters abroad organized concerts on their behalf. European ambassadors engaged in discussions about the affair with Russian metropolitans over dinner. Groups of activists continued their mission, spreading the “punk prayer” across Russia. “Virgin Mary, Mother of God, banish Putin!” Some recite the line under their breath before icons of the Virgin Mary, others scream it out loud—and know that the police will come for them just as they had come for Pussy Riot.

What is at stake here? The whole affair is certainly about more than musical taste. The aim is not to make the “punk prayers” performed in balaclavas part of the Orthodox service. Pussy Riot represents a struggle over public space, a debate about the legitimacy of political protest by means of cultural action and the deeper significance of actions and counter-actions. Sympathizers place Pussy Riot’s performance into the context of a democratic movement which, lacking “standard” means, must reach for “non-standard” means of political engagement. Their opponents, headed by patriarch Kirill Gundyayev (nicknamed “Gund’aj,” rendered as “Gundy” in the translation above), characterize the protest as a criminal attack on an Orthodox cathedral, something which does sometimes occur in Russia, and thereby mobilize simple believers “in the defense of Orthodoxy.”

But there is a deeper cultural background to the controversy: Pussy Riot’s performance falls into the Orthodox tradition of *iurodstvo*, or

439 “Pussy Riot’s Punk Prayer is pure protest poetry,” Carol Rumen’s Poem of the Week, *The Guardian*, August 20, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/20/pussy-riot-punk-prayer-lyrics>, accessed February 16, 2017.

holy foolery (Scene 7). The “old” iurodstvo became absorbed into the system of “canonical” church practices long ago, reduced to its exterior markers and in this way robbed of its original provocative-ness. In its place, however, there has arisen new, “non-canonical” iurodstvo, one less attached to ecclesiastical surroundings but nevertheless fulfilling the traditional function of religious provocation, a moral warning in grotesque form. Pussy Riot’s colorful balaclavas are today’s equivalent to the chains of Basil the Blessed.

Pussy Riot’s performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and many other cultural and political actions in today’s Russia immediately recall another venerable phenomenon of Russian religious culture: the longing for martyrdom, the cult of bearing pain, the intentional incitement of situations that carry fatal consequences, and events leading directly to a violent death. When considering Pussy Riot’s mini-concert, concluded by arrest; the vociferous prayers of their sympathizers, brought to the same end; the activists going to Red Square with white anti-Putin ribbons; the whole of this culture of flash protests which must in advance count on police repression and possible prosecution, one remembers the Old Believers of the seventeenth century (Scene 10) who similarly stood defenseless against the combined machinery of the church and threw themselves into ruin by ostentatiously crossing themselves in the forbidden, “anti-state,” “heretical” manner—with two fingers instead of three. One cannot help but recall the Decembrists standing on Senate Square in December 1825, waiting to be apprehended and subsequently hanged or at least expelled to Siberia. And one cannot help but remember the “eight brave ones” of August 1968 who stood in Red Square with banners protesting the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, each one of them knowing that every minute of protest could be met by a year of imprisonment.⁴⁴⁰

440 Cf. Adam Hradilek, ed., *Za vaši i naši svobodu* (Prague: Torst, 2010).

To be sure, one must recognize a substantial difference between holy fools and Old Believers, on the one side, and the Decembrists, “Eight Brave Ones,” or today’s anti-Putin demonstrators, on the other. When westerners living in a secular age think of the former, the “religious fanatics,” they can only shake their heads uncomprehendingly. The civil activists of the latter group, however, receive applause and even support. But from the perspective of mentality and style of protest, these groups all have something in common. Each inspires admiration for their sacrifice, a level of sacrifice no longer common in the West. On the other hand, they also raise the painful question as to when, and if, there will ever emerge strategies in Russia beyond this tradition of self-destruction, strategies of opposition truly capable of overthrowing the power of authoritarianism. Whatever the case may be, Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century is witnessing the latest scene in an ancient struggle between two competing notions of patriotism and the sacred.

Still another ancient rivalry persists in Russia today—that between “eastern” Russia and “western” Russia, the latter historically embodied in Galician Rus, Novgorod Rus, and Lithuanian Rus. “Western” Russia has long abandoned its claim to the name of Russia. It is now called Ukraine. Ukraine, which developed as an independent state in 1991, long wavered between a European and a Russian orientation. A large section of the political and economic elite is tied to Russia. Yet two revolutionary waves have already attempted to turn Ukraine toward Europe: the “Orange Revolution” of 2004 and the “Maidan” of 2013. In distinction to Russian conditions, these revolutions received support not merely from a small intellectual elite, but from the overwhelming part of the population; it received significant support from the churches as well, at least from the Greek Catholic church in western Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox church, having torn itself away from the Moscow patriarchate.

In the end, the “Orange Revolution” succumbed to the contentiousness of its democratic leaders and to Russian economic pressure.

The “Maidan,” so far, has been more successful—and that’s why it awakens such ferocity in Vladimir Putin. That is why Putin occupied Crimea (Scene 1), the symbolic cradle of Rus. That is why he seeks to remove the Russian-speaking eastern region from Ukraine. That is why he propagandistically portrays the Ukrainian movement for independence as “fascists,” as followers of Stepan Bandera (Scene 12).

Currently, the West is not considering the role of Ukraine with sufficient gravity. In his book *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), Samuel Huntington assigns Ukraine along with Belarus to the sphere of “Orthodox” civilization. Accordingly, it is best that they stick together and the West resist the urge to intervene. But Ukraine represents a fundamentally weak link in Huntington’s thesis. Ukraine is more than just Ukraine. Ukraine is (fellow) heir to the European state known as Kievan Rus, heir to Galician Rus and Lithuanian Rus. Indirectly, Ukraine is also heir to Novgorod Rus and to all “western” Russia, demonstrating that “Russianness” need not be wed to Uvarov’s triad of “orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality,” that “Russianness” can contribute positively to the cultural currents of Europe.

Truly, Ukraine is more than just Ukraine. Ukraine today represents the hope of neighboring Belarus; it provides a haven for democratically-minded exiles from Putin’s Russia who are constructing in Ukraine a new, alternative “Russia beyond Russia.” Ukraine represents a very distant hope even for Russia itself.

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