

CHAPTER 3

(Post)Ideological novel

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They witnessed how a new apparatus has been taking shape right in front of their eyes. Predatorily aiming at extracting profit, it followed nothing but its own logic of building a hierarchy in which neither educational pedigree, nor former accomplishments, nor long friendship made any difference.

Iulii Dubov, *A Big Ration (Bolshaia paika* 2002: 437)

Any business is solid as long as it is rooted in blood ...: the black blood of the earth, the oil of war, the generously squeezed juice of the soldiers.

Dmitrii Bykov, *ZhD* (2012: 37)

Everything is virtual, everything is relative, everything is an outcome of conspiracy.

Aleksandr Prokhanov, *Mister Hexogen (Gospodin Geksogen* 2002: 466)

Bad books

A major communist rally in a Moscow square brought together a strange mélange of generations and social types. People carrying portraits of communist leaders looked ostensibly older than their Soviet heroes. “Old and disappointed,” they seemed to be “on their last gasp, ready to die” in the square. Along with these “doomed,” “poor,” and “depressing,” there was a very different crowd: several hundred people, “strange, young, and united ... by some kind of common scar,” which distinguished them from the others since the moment of their arrival in this world. Initially, these young radicals just chanted “Revolution,” but before long they morphed these chants into violent clashes with the city police (Prilepin 2006: 7, 10). For some reason, San’kia Tishin, an active member of this group of the “strange, young, and united,” was not arrested. Escaping to his provincial native city (500 km from Moscow), he did not stay there but kept

going – to the village where his father was born and where he was recently buried. The village itself was also “on the way out, dying,” and the stories of San’kia’s still-living grandmother only made the *Zeitgeist* all the more salient: her “speech imperceptibly moved from one thing to another, but the topic stayed the same: everybody has died, and there is nothing else around anymore” (Prilepin 2006: 36, 39).

For the rest of the novel, San’kia, the protagonist of Zakhar Prilepin’s (b.1975) controversial fiction book with the same title, will spend his time in a high-adrenaline search for viable reasons and convincing ideas that would allow him to avoid the existential dread of meaningless, sad, and depressing death. A combination of a road story, a coming of age romance, and an action thriller, *San’kia* is a thinly disguised novel about Russian National Bolsheviks (*natsboly*), a small but active group of young political radicals famous for their performative assaults on public figures and violent scuffles with police (Oushakine 2009b). Somewhat unusually, Prilepin frames post-Soviet political radicalism using standard romantic tropes: politics is just a useful narrative device that organizes the protagonist’s convoluted quest for self-understanding.

On his way out of this world, San’kia does discover a set of indisputable moral principles – “There is God. It’s bad without father. Mother is kind and dear. There is only one Motherland” – and sums up his search for the moral foundations in a clear-cut slogan: “The meaning [of life] comes from knowing what to die for” (Prilepin 2006: 114, 363). Yet, simple answers are usually bad solutions for complicated questions. And San’kia’s own (apparent) death, in the middle of a major urban riot that he himself organized in his home town, proves little and accomplishes nothing.

While relying on romantic conventions, Prilepin’s novel reverses the traditional trajectory of the Bildungsroman: the hero’s maturity is unachievable, his integration into society is impossible, and the story of his development is actually a story of his quick disintegration and demise. Yet fear of dull and prolonged dying is indeed overcome here: San’kia lives fast and dies young.

Published in Moscow in 2006 by the leftist *Ad Marginem* press, Prilepin’s *San’kia* was a major literary event that polarized critics in particular and readers in general (Lipovetsky 2012; *San’kia* N.D.). Deeply steeped in the narrative and stylistic traditions of Soviet literature – from Maxim Gorky to Boris Polevoi to Eduard Limonov – *San’kia* contributed to the revival of the ideological novel genre that became so characteristic of post-millennial Russian literature. Prilepin’s novel provides a perfect point of departure for my discussion: as *San’kia* vividly suggests, death

becomes acceptable, even desirable, when it is framed with ideologically charged concepts. Demise becomes meaningful. Violence is justified.

The role of ideology here should not be reduced only to ideological indoctrination, however. Rather, it should be understood as a particular process of subjectivization through which the individual emerges as a recognizable social subject. A few years ago Peter Sloterdijk described a dynamic that might help us better understand the logic of this process. Writing about subjectivity and agency, Sloterdijk concluded that “correctly understood subjectivity ... always implies the capacity to act.” Yet, this transition from subjectivity-as-potentiality to subjectivity-as-practice has one important precondition: “subjects upgrade themselves to action-capable agents by advising themselves, persuading themselves and giving themselves the sign to shed inhibitions and act” (Sloterdijk 2013: 58–9).

What Sloterdijk points to is the usual problem that arises between subjectivity understood as a form of (discursive) *reflection* and subjectivity perceived as a form of externalized *behavior*. The two do not necessarily come together, and Sloterdijk’s idea of self-disinhibition explains how a particular *vision* of reality could be translated in real *acts*. Disinhibition is a removal of hesitation and obstacles to action. Yet, disinhibition is not an action; disinhibition is a condition of its possibility. It is a starting point for the process of channeling one’s own “entrepreneurial energies” in a purposeful direction. It is crucial that within this understanding of subjectivity, “the signs to shed inhibitions” rarely come from within: these signs are indeed products, carefully crafted, packaged, and disseminated. To put it in Sloterdijk’s own words, “The quandary of being a subject creates markets for intellectuals who offer their support for needy, under-informed and under-motivated subjectivity” (Sloterdijk 2013: 63). Ideologues and consultants are manufacturers and suppliers of disinhibiting substances for activity-seeking subjects: articulated by experts, ideologies transform desires into actions, providing the subjects both with means of discursive expression and a cartography of experience. “Sovereignty,” as Sloterdijk sums it up, “means deciding oneself what to fall for” (Sloterdijk 2013: 65). Or, as San’kia’s moral quest concluded, “The meaning [of life] comes from knowing what to die for” (Prilepin 2006: 363).

The ideological novel presents a striking distancing (if not a complete departure) from the stylistic, narrative, and ideological conventions that were so characteristic of postmodernist Russian literature in the late 1980s–90s. There are hardly any language games in the ideological novel. There is almost no irony. Instead, parodic playfulness (so familiar in

Viktor Pelevin, among others) is overshadowed by a deadly serious vision of things. Major metanarratives (about “liberation,” “nation,” or a “utopian future”), which seemed to have vanished completely a decade earlier, are alive and well in this prose (though not without a post-communist twist). It looks as if the ideological novel successfully circumvented the postmodern period and its aesthetics by bringing back the familiar conventions of classical Russian prose – with its well-developed plot, distinct characters, strong moral code, and clear ideological message.

Socially and aesthetically, this return to ideology after “the end of ideology” (and history) that was proclaimed in the last few decades is remarkable. However, these new ideological novels should not be mistaken for a new redaction of the old and familiar *sotsrealism*. While reviving themes, conventions, and tropes from previous periods, the ideological novel from the first decade of the new century is deeply informed by recent historical and political development. The ideological realism of these novels, in other words, is not real; it is historicist. It works as a device aimed at creating certain discursive effects. Similar to the efforts of the Pre-Raphaelites in the second half of the nineteenth century, this ideological prose is a revivalist attempt to get back to “the roots” by transferring artistic investments from issues of expressive means and manners to that of content (Barringer 2012). Writers that I will discuss in this chapter seem to be abandoning the aesthetic conventions of Modernist prose with a speed and zeal equal to the Pre-Raphaelites’ desire to leave Mannerism behind. It was not by accident that in their 1848 manifesto, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood chose as its main aim the task of having “genuine ideas to express” (Rossetti 1895: 1: 135). By downplaying style, they emphasize substance. It is the same prominent interest of the ideological novel in “genuine” *ideas* and their realistic *expression* that I want to explore in this essay. These novels could be called ideological in the sense that they are organized and sustained not so much by story-telling or character development as by *a set of social values*, by a constellation of *key ideologemes* that determine the structure of the narrative. The distinction between ideologemes and the narrative is not meant to resuscitate the traditional juxtaposition of plot and story, *siuzhet* and *fabula*. What I want to suggest is that each novel can be read as a manifesto in which the ideological message is articulated through the vocabulary of quasi-realist fiction rather than through the usual tropes of political rhetoric. Characters here are vehicles that drive values and ideas to the point of their final destination.

What radically distinguishes the current redaction of the ideological novel from its Soviet predecessor is the fundamental negativity of the

current genre. Disinhibiting ideological values might be useful for organizing narratives, but these narratives work against the very values that structured them in the first place. As Mark Lipovetsky suggested, forms of social activism depicted in *San'kia* are motorial reaction-formations rather than conscious actions and activities of the subject. San'kia's acts of "righteous lawlessness" (Prilepin 2006: 339) indicate nothing but motility of the organism, liberated by ideology but untainted by any intellectual reflection (Lipovetsky 2012). The process of disinhibition clearly takes place here, but it is less clear whether it is capable of producing any form of subjectivity. In this respect, the ideological novel is a novel about the failure of ideology, and it is precisely this double fascination of contemporary writers with the power of ideology and its inevitable futility that I find both symptomatic and interesting about the ideological novel in today's Russia.

The three novels that I analyze describe three distinctive "disinhibition agents." *A Big Ration* by Iulii Dubov depicts *business* as the key post-Soviet agent that unleashes creative energies, creating social and personal problems at the same time. In Alexander Prokhanov's *Mr. Hexogen*, it is *power* that crushes barriers and motivates people. Finally, *ZhD* by Dmitrii Bykov (English translation *Living Souls*, 2010) forefronts issues of *blood*.¹ National belonging emerges in it as a way of being and a form of knowledge production, and the nation provides a teleology *and* an ontology: past, present, and future are all determined by birth. Published within a few years of each other, these novels describe major driving forces that have been changing Russia since the mid-1980s.

None of the novels is a masterpiece. Their visions are schematic, their messages are simplistic, and their styles are familiar. Like Pre-Raphaelite art, these examples of the ideological novel belong to the aesthetic of trash and kitsch. Excessively wordy and oversaturated with narrative structures, they are interesting not because of their plot twists or stylistic discoveries. It is their symptomatic function that makes them stand apart. Describing his book, Dmitrii Bykov reflected, "This is probably a bad book. I don't think it could have turned out any better, though ... [T]his book is wrong on so many accounts. I'd love to have written it differently, but I don't think that was possible. Moreover, I was not aiming at writing a good book. Rather, it was important for me to write down things that I actually wanted to say" (Bykov 2012: 6). Bykov's line of thought could also be easily extended to the other novels. Indeed, all three novels are bad in their own way. Each of them is a "wrong" book, actively provoking ideological and aesthetic rejection. Though coming from different perspectives, they

nonetheless document a strikingly similar trajectory to the one mapped out by Prilepin's *San'kia*. Different disinhibition agents (business, power, or blood) might well unleash different actions, but they can hardly change the direction of the overall path: being a subject in post-communist Russia is a deadly business.

Iulii Dubov's *A Big Ration* (2000)
Business: paying with life and brotherhood

Iulii Dubov (b.1948) is an unusual writer. In the 1970s–90s, he was a researcher – first in the Institute of Management Problems, then in the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Institute of Systemic Studies. In 1992, Dubov became a key leader of *LogoVAZ*, a company that re-exported Ladas to Russia. In *A Big Ration*, Dubov presents a fictionalized account of his first-hand experience of economic transformations that were taking place during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Dubov puts it, “there are no invented events in this book”; but he is also quick to add that “there are no really existing people” either (Dubov 2002: 8). The caveat misled no one, though: readers and critics rightly assumed that Platon, the main character of the novel, is just a slightly disguised portrait of Boris Berezovskii, a powerful dealmaker during the rule of Boris Yeltsin (see Klebnikov 2000)².

Dubov frames the book as an attempt “to tell about the formula of luck, about the rules of the game, and about the costs of the victory” (Dubov 2002:8). This somewhat optimistic promise is radically offset by the four epigraphs. Suggesting a modality of reading for the whole novel, each epigraph points to the theme of death, killing, and loss. One of them, a quote from Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, explains the book's title and offers its interpretation: “In camp a large ration kills, not a small one” (Shalamov 1994: 127). Yet, as *A Big Ration* shows, size is a relative concept: the reader never gets a clear sense of the point beyond which the ration becomes lethally big. What the reader does learn is that death, combined with money and power, acts as the main disinhibition substance.

Things in *A Big Ration* – just like in the other two novels – acquire a momentum after a death. Or, rather, after a chain of deaths. To quote Dubov at length:

Brezhnev died.

A great empire, which was cemented with poverty and hatred, covering half of Europe and half of Asia ... this great country ... began a quick move to the abyss ... With Andropov's death, the potential energy that

was accumulated during his rule transformed itself into a kinetic one ... The movement downhill picked up ... Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev was appointed Chairman of the State Commission in charge of funeral ceremonies for comrade Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko. A sunrise of *perestroika* lit up the country with its bright rays of new thinking. For a moment, the country stood still – on the edge, looking straight into the abyss. (Dubov 2002: 46–7)

Dubov's metonymic deployment of metaphor – the death of a person as the death of the country – would be replicated throughout the novel. By closely following a selected group of friends, the reader learns about the gradual dissolution of society's norms, links, relationships, and routines. Named after the novel's key characters ("Sergei," "Victor," "Mark," "Musa," and "Platon"), each chapter presents a biographical chronicle of a corresponding hero, blending personal stories with stories about business. Symptomatically, the only chapter that is not named for a character is one titled *Intermission: 1991*, the year when the USSR vanished. It is the calendar – biographical or universal – that arranges people in the novel. To some degree, Dubov's narrative choice is overdetermined by his choice of the main trope: metonymy requires contiguity. Hence, the biographical chronicle works as the organizing logic of the novel itself. There is a bigger issue behind this choice, though. In "The Epoch's Props" ("Dekoratsii epokhi," 1926) Boris Eikhenbaum usefully traced a link between the novel organized as a biographical chronicle and the social context that precipitated this choice of genre. Reviewing Olga Forsch's novel *Contemporaries* (*Sovremenniki*, 1926), Eikhenbaum pointed out that "so far, various attempts to use the material of our contemporary daily life for creating a novel have been unsuccessful because this material is still too topical. It lacks literariness; it cannot be plotted because of its topicality. It fits better the framework of the *ocherk*, feuilleton, or satirical novel, all of which are concerned not with characters or plot but with topicality itself" (Eikhenbaum 2001: 130). Using material from everyday life as its major source, Dubov's novel is similarly oriented towards "topicality itself." Characters populate the text, but the main message comes from the repetition of the same biographical and narrative contour: the individual starts his rapid path towards a violent death by immersing himself in the new Russian business milieu.

A Big Ration begins as a combination of the bromance novel and the productivist novel, Alexandre Dumas' *Three Musketeers* meets here proto-Socialist-Realist Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* (*Tsement*, 1925). A group of male friends build from scratch a highly successful company. The group

is a brotherhood of equals: they have known each other since their childhood or college years, and their cooperation is based on trust structured by the power of affect and memory. In the early 1990s, following economic liberalization, Platon, the charismatic leader of the group, decides to create a business, using the knowledge and connections that he accumulated while working on systemic problems of management in an academic institution. Together with Larry, the administrative brain of the group, Platon develops a software called *Project* for a major Soviet carmaker (VAZ is the clear prototype) that streamlines inventory classification and improves the balance between supply and demand for parts and materials. Platon and Larry manage to convince the plant's board of directors that, in return, they should set aside a permanent quota of cars that cannot be sold without the approval of *Project's* leaders. As a result, in a country with an unstable economy, shortages of goods, and galloping inflation, Platon and his friends secure a constant flow of nonperishable and highly desirable products that can be exchanged for other goods, favors, or money.

Project gradually gets transformed into a company, *Infokar*, which expands itself by both slowly taking over the car plant itself and building a network of related businesses. Eventually *Infokar* establishes direct contacts with Italy's *Fiat Group* and Germany's *Mercedes-Benz* and emerges as an exclusive importer (with huge tax breaks) of major foreign cars. Thanks to strategic partnerships, a convoluted system of control, bribes, intimidation, and violence, *Infokar* quickly turns itself into a major holding with a diversified structure, a chain of representatives throughout the country, and a huge amount of money safely parked in a Swiss bank. As the narrator of the novel observes:

The speed with which *Infokar* transformed itself from an ordinary commercial company into a leader of Russia's business was incomprehensible and even frightening ... [E]very day, hundreds of cars departed from *Infokar's* parking lots, leaving behind about half a million dollars ... *Infokar's* main office started attracting representatives from gold-mining brigades and coal basins, from metallurgical plants and not-quite-yet-dead kolkhozes, from creative unions and emerging commercial companies, from the Ministry of the Interior and bandit formations. (Dubov 2002: 584)

Dubov provides the reader with multiple details, vividly portraying intricate rituals and conventions of early post-Soviet business. Yet Russian variations of Ponzi scheme or fraud manipulations with shares scrupulously described in *A Big Ration* are needed mainly to make only one major point: creating a business empire in Russia is a self-destructive enterprise. The evolution of the key metaphor of the novel – *the machine* – is quite

indicative in this respect. As the novel progresses, we see how the main objects with which *Infokar's* leaders are obsessed – technological devices, here computers (*elektronno-vychislitel'nye mashiny*) and cars (*avtomashiny*) – become supplemented with human machines: “Platon always saw Larry as a fundamentally reliable and faultless machine that would carry out Platon’s schemes and decisions” (2002: 528).

It is this deindividualizing effect of the constant rush for money, expansion, and influence that emerges as the main moral theme of the book. The moralistic critique of the antihumanism of capitalism is hardly new, of course. What makes it interesting here is the underlying structural mechanism of antihumanism that Dubov outlines. In *A Big Ration*, deindividualization and dehumanization (as well as disinhibition) begin with a sudden loss of the previously held trust in the bonds of solidarity that were forged by shared experience. Sergei, one of the key characters, explains it in a conversation, “I’ve known all the guys for many years; I know them well ... For instance, when I talk to one, it’s the same as if I were talking to any of them, or to all of them at once. It makes no difference ... [T]here is a biological organism ... you can cut it into ten pieces, and each piece would be exactly the same as all the others; the same organism, just ten of it” (2002: 159).

Strikingly, dehumanization emerges as a negation of this idea of mirror-like sameness. However, it is not the individualizing *difference* as such that is seen as problematic in the novel. What is perceived as degrading is the impossibility of the instantaneous communion of the same/equal that difference creates. Difference eventually appears in *A Big Ration* as a masked threat and a hidden conspiracy. This erasure of trust does not happen overnight; it is produced gradually – through the individual’s experience of fraud, deception, and betrayal. But its consequences are devastating. Mistrust becomes a default attitude: everybody is a potential werewolf and a shape-shifter; everybody lies to everybody else. One of the novel’s minor characters explains, “When it comes to business, you trust no one. Friend, brother, or mother – it does not matter ... [H]owever creepy this might feel, it is the rule. An axiom ... Any purposeful activity based on trust is doomed. Moreover, it is simply detrimental ... Every month, we fish out of the Neva River two or three bodies of these people who [were killed because they] decided to trust. There is even a term for this: ‘business on trust’” (2002: 174). Difference reemerges here, recoded as difference in motivational structure. People should be taken seriously not because of their infinite diversity but because they are the carriers of

differently targeted interests. Hence, as Larry puts it in the novel, “I do not think about people. I think about interests” (2002: 525).

When “moral considerations give way to the considerations of practicality” (2002: 784), what could act, then, as an organizing force and structuring principle? When the only thing that differentiates one person from another is the strength of their desire to satisfy their interests and maximize their profit, what could serve as a basis for building relations and communities? *A Big Ration* shows that it is the organizing and hierarchical logic of the Business Corporation that replaces affective connections, bonds of friendship, and networks of kinship. Perceived in military terms, business is seen here as another way of conducting wars. Early in the book, the narrator describes Platon’s approach to business as a metonymic (continuous/contiguous) chain of explosions:

Platon was inventing his deductive methods of business, putting them into practice right away. First, a small explosion happened somewhere nearby; then, in a distance, there was a bigger explosion, detonated by the first one. Right after that, a really big one would take place, then another one ... Without stopping, without a break. Contracts, financial deals, systems of limitations, already in place or only envisioned ... [A]ll that was just a prop for the main scene: for the chain reaction, which was compressed in time and spread out in space. (2002: 97)

By the end of the novel, this equation of business with a depopulated field ideally suited for game theory experiments and abstract modeling produces the logical conclusion: the only formation that secures and sustains the ideal business environment is “an iron, merciless dictatorship” (2002: 785). The business dictatorship is also a form of self-defense. Money is power, and more money means more advantage in the fight for more money. At a crucial moment in the novel, Platon insists that making big money is a way of securing the business: “[W]e must have enough power, resources, and will to prevent the [Communist] past from coming back. We can lose only in one case – when those who are against us are more powerful than we are” (2002: 748).

Occasionally, this business-as-war turns the metaphor into realistic description: a depopulated field of strategic “chain explosions” becomes an actual firing ground. Contracted murders in the novel work as effective tools for resolving business disputes. (Dubov also employs them for getting out of narrative dead ends that he constructs.) It is hard to say, however, who wins in this war. On its way to success, *Infokar* loses most of its founding fathers. Larry and Platon are the only ones who manage to survive multiple attacks, contract killings, and staged accidents. With the

help of the Kremlin and the KGB, competitors severely damage *Infokar*. Yet the last scenes of *A Big Ration* leave the reader in suspense: weakened but not destroyed, Platon's empire might have enough power to strike back.

What Dubov does make abundantly clear is the moral costs in this story about the first generation of post-Soviet entrepreneurs. The final pages of the novel describe an imaginary dialogue between Platon and Sergei (the latter had earlier committed suicide). Sergei reminds Platon, the "leader" (*vozhd'*), about their conversation that took place in 1991. Back then, in the company of old friends, Platon had insisted that their brotherhood would prevail because it was "the main and only value that we all have." Reflecting on the development that followed since that conversation, Sergei sums up the Mephistophelian nature of the deal. Everybody had to pay a steep price for building their common business, each in his own way: "I paid with my life. You, with our brotherhood. And I am not sure who lost more" (2002: 811–12).

It would be wrong to reduce the meaning of *A Big Ration* only to the message about the cruelty of new Russian capitalism. As Dubov shows, the business empire – a money-making machine that expands itself by constantly absorbing and discarding people – is an *outcome* of the uncertainties and ambiguities of post-Soviet Russia just as much as it is a *reaction* to these uncertainties and ambiguities. The importance of money here is structural: it helps to translate qualitative differences into quantitative ones, establishing equals by subverting hierarchies. Yet, as Dubov reminds us, money could take you only so far. What is really crucial is the energy and insight disinhibited (or neoliberated) by the work of the negative. What really matters is a personal, individualized, autonomous ability to transform a "chaotic shuffling" of things and people into a "clear sequence of actions aimed at achieving the goal" (2002: 14).

**Aleksandr Prokhanov's *Mr. Hexogen* (2002)
Power: creating conflicts, controlling history**

In 2013, Alfred Kokh and Petr Aven, two outspoken ministers in Boris Yeltsin's government, published a substantial volume of interviews with key Russian politicians. The general topic of the volume was the reforms of the 1990s, but the book's more specific focus was the role of Egor Gaidar, the acting prime minister who oversaw the Russian "shock therapy" in 1992–4. The conversation with Anatoly Chubais, who presided

over the controversial privatization of state assets in the 1990s, offers an important view on politics in Russia after communism:

- Alfred Kokh:* ... [F]or many people, Egor Gaidar symbolized violence ...
Anatolii Chubais: Despite looking soft, he was quite tough. But it is impossible to govern Russia without being tough (*bez zhestkosti*).
Alfred Kokh: I think he did not value his own life, and he thought that others were only pretending when they said that they did care about themselves.
Anatolii Chubais: Not quite. His thinking was similar to the thinking of the aristocrat. He had a mission; that's what guided him. The country needed something, so he was going to deliver it.
 (Aven and Kokh, 2013: 112)

These retrospective commentaries of Russian politicians helpfully parallel the ideological novel's similar concerns with, on the one hand, political determination-as-violence and, on the other, the disregard for one's own and other people's lives. As in Dubov's novel, people are seen functionally – as vehicles of policies, important as long as they help advance the goals of the mission. While Dubov's novel transposed these concerns into the field of the 1990s business wars, Prokhanov's *Mr. Hexogen* framed the same issues and anxieties within the language of power struggle and a war of wills. After all, "it is impossible to govern Russia without being tough." A new social order emerges in this novel through the already familiar path: it is a reaction to the chaos of the 1990s, and a protection from it.

Aleksandr Prokhanov (b.1938) made his literary career as a journalist in the 1970s, covering wars in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Cambodia, and Angola for major Soviet newspapers. Later he produced a series of seven books that novelized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The last installment of this Heptateuch, *Mr. Hexogen*, came out in 2002, attracting a lot of attention and winning Russia's National Bestseller award. Prokhanov's conspiracy story framed as an action thriller was a scandal of sorts. Since the early 1990s, Prokhanov has been actively involved in politics. He fiercely criticized Yeltsin's government and defended the Soviet legacy in the newspaper *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), which he still edits. In fact, the novel, with its graphic portrayal of the vices and corruption of the Russian political and business elites, is often not that different from critical articles and essays published in *Zavtra*. *Mr. Hexogen* might be not as ethnographic as Dubov's fictionalized version of early post-Soviet business, but like Dubov's account Prokhanov's story presents a historically situated reflection of ideas, attitudes, and ideologies that circulated outside the strict realm of literature.

In typical conspiracy-story fashion, *Mr. Hexogen* starts with a death. The main character of the novel, Viktor Beloseltsev, a retired KGB general, receives a phone call that informs him of the upcoming funeral of his long-term colleague, General Avdeev (aka Swahili), another prominent intelligence officer active during the Soviet period. At the funeral, Beloseltsev re-establishes contact with people from the Intelligence Service and learns that Swahili did not fade into retirement in 1991, as Beloseltsev had thought. Instead, “after the collapse of the country, when power was seized by the traitors,” Swahili began the project of his life (Prokhanov 2002: 27). The Secret Union (*Tainyi Soiuz*) created by Swahili functioned as a shadow government of sorts, controlling and directing all major economic and political developments in the country. General Grechishnikov, a secret service general, explained it to Beloseltsev:

We left our headquarters on Lubyanka Square; we left our “alma-mater,” which was immediately swarmed by traitors and scum. They dug into our archives and our files, they occupied our offices. We intentionally scattered in all directions so that we could be united later. Swahili was the heart and the brain of the Union. Our people are in the Army, in the police, and in the secret services. We are – invisibly, in the shadows – in the Church, in international organizations, in the Kremlin, in the Presidential Administration, and in all – however small and tiny – political parties ... Every one of their initiatives contains our will and our intention. (Prokhanov 2002: 32–3)

The purpose of the Secret Union, Beloseltsev is informed, is to resurrect Russia as “a great power of the world community.” The ultimate aim is to ensure that the country will “repossess” its future, purged from the “rotten” Communist party, nasty bureaucracy, and the “twisted liberal intelligentsia” (2002: 34). For Beloseltsev, who had spent his post-Soviet years vegetating “without belief, meaning, and heroism” (2002: 333), the news about the Secret Union was invigorating, both personally and epistemologically. Suddenly, the idea of belonging to a power institution had a disinhibiting effect, making actions possible and goals visible: “The chaos that has been surrounding him all these years is manageable. Behind destructive, crazy elemental forces, there was a hidden Center with a rational plan of action. [Beloseltsev’s] isolated and exhausted mind finally discovered its counterpart” (2002: 52).

The understanding that the chaos was only a perception error, a result of the inability to recognize a new structure beyond an appearance of disorder, shapes the rest of the novel. Reality is construed as a network of overlapping and competing plots. Ostensibly disconnected things, events, and people are *actually* tightly linked, following the protocols that are

known only to a selected few. Each chapter of the novel, then, presents a particular plot. Obviously, these plots are not (and could not be) autonomous. Each of them is an element of a much larger conspiracy. Each of them is properly fitted into the intricate chain of events envisioned by Swahili in order to achieve a right distribution of people and resources in Russia.

The world view behind *The Swahili Project*, as this master plot is called in the novel, is not that different from the vision already outlined in Dubov's book. Using "explosions" of various kinds strategically, the Secret Union rearranges Russia's political landscape, carving out within it a powerful subject position for itself. This method of "controlled explosions" is called "conflict management" in the novel. One of the intelligence officers clarifies the essence: "[O]ur ability to artificially create conflicts and manage them – our governance through conflicts – is a way of getting power and a tool for removing obstacles. We create a series of cracks and fractures in the monolithic protective wall of the enemy ...; we use them to move carefully ... towards the heart of power" (2002: 53).

As in any conspiracy theory, the ultimate enemy in *Mr. Hexogen* is quite predictable. The Secret Union singles out the two major oligarchic "corporations rightfully called empires" (2002: 266) that emerged in the country with the help of the feeble President and his greedy daughter. By privatizing Russia's valuable resources and creating a widespread network of television propaganda, the two (Jewish) magnates use their empires to "form a new reality": they turn Moscow-the-Third-Rome into Moscow-a-New-Jerusalem (2002: 169, 425). Russia is to become "a branch of Israel," a New Khazaria, which "would ensure the conditions for maximal flourishing and prosperity" of Jewish civilization and, at the same time, avert "any form of the Russians' self-consciousness and state sovereignty" (2002: 223, 110).

Inspired by the patriotism of despair (Oushakine 2009a), Beloseltsev joins the secret society of Russian patriots, acting as a key agent in a sequence of high-profile events. The overall goal of this fight is overwhelming: at stake is Russia's very survival. Otherwise, "the Russians will be remembered only through the Dostoevsky myth, a scroll of an ancient manuscript, and a pre-war edition of Pushkin's works kept in the Library of Congress" (Prokhanov 2002: 46). It is in the process of achieving this "sacred goal" that fundamental displacements and substitutions begin taking place. Suddenly, the project of "protecting" the Russians from the Khazars becomes reduced to a banal regime change: the corrupt and incapable President of the country (usually referred to as *Istukan*, a

dummy) is to be replaced with a creature carefully cultivated by the Union (*Izbrannik*, the Chosen One). Protecting Russians also means first killing quite a few of them: Beloseltsev lures the country's Chief Prosecutor into a sex scandal (which is taped and then televised); he involves the country's prime minister in a violent conflict with Chechen *boeviks*; he helps poison a former mayor of St. Petersburg after the latter threatened to reveal some uncomfortable facts about *Izbrannik*.

Prokhanov links together these real-life events from Russia's "roaring 90s" to build a purposeful sequence of actions, "the enfilade of conspiracies" (2002: 305). Using Beloseltsev as an outsider looking in, Prokhanov reveals a power structure that has no place for any moral strictures or ethical principles. The lesson that Beloseltsev learns in his attempts to rescue Russia is that power struggles are struggles for power, not for high principles or the common good. Punctuated by deaths and saturated by universal hatred, the story presents power as the ultimate source of evil and self-annihilation.

Beloseltsev's disenchantment with power takes time to develop. Through instigating and managing "conflicts," Beloseltsev – as a good ethnographer – traces the operational logic and structure of a peculiar post-Soviet formation in which new Russian business is symbiotically linked with the old Soviet security forces. The "dispersion" and "diffusion" of the intelligence officers and their subsequent consolidation in the Secret Union, about which Beloseltsev was told so much, turned out to be not quite true. Former KGB officers did not disappear into thin air. Nor did they "tactically" infiltrate the enemies' structures. Instead, they became an *integral* part of the private security services and intelligence centers created by magnates and oligarchs to accumulate valuable information about their competitors and enemies. The previously centralized KGB structure was not really diffused; it was *replicated*, multiple times and in multiple locations. Similarly deceptive was another high-ranking objective of the secret patriots: having populated the oligarchs' financial empires, they did not return their wealth to the Russian state but instead privatized the available empires. The secret Union patriots were shape-shifters, just as greedy as the builders of the New Khazaria were (2002: 62). Their defense was an unrecognized offense. The patriotic struggle for the revival of Russia was just an economic takeover of huge proportions; a giant example of a brutally enforced merger and acquisition. After the two magnates are killed and their assets are pocketed by the leaders of the Secret Union, Grechishnikov tells Beloseltsev, "The revival of the USSR is not pertinent anymore" (2002: 360).

The combination of disgust with power, a feeling of impotence, and a sense of betrayal is especially poignant in the most dramatic scene of the novel, where Beloseltsev tries to prevent the explosion of high-rise apartment buildings in a Moscow suburb. Through his investigative work, Beloseltsev discovers that the Chechen boeviks who prepared hexogen for the explosion, and their alleged enemies, the secret patriots and intelligence officers working to restore Russia's glory, are, in fact, members of the same cabal: "They are all connected ... They will detonate the fuse together" (2002: 417). They do push the button (together), and Beloseltsev, unable to prevent the explosion, has to witness an apartment block imploding in the middle of the night, burying unsuspecting people under its rubble.

Prokhanov's novel about corrupt and corrupting power leaves little hope. The mission justifies the means; the country's interests trump the interests of the individual. Perhaps more important is the novel's overall message that there is no such a thing as "the nation's interests." What counts as "national" is always the product of a concrete group of people with direct access to power. Any attempt to influence power institutions from within seems to create the same transformative effect. "Sacred goals" of the nation's revival and utopian ideas about universal justice always get reduced to base concerns of accumulation of property and money. Using very different material, *Mr. Hexogen* depicts a logic of social organization that shares much with the model described by Dubov. An effective institution is always a dehumanizing apparatus where the individual's characteristics, motivations, and relationships are of little relevance. Justified by their mission, these goal-oriented and efficient power machines rely on people as their fuel in order to "manage history" by creating a never-ending chain of lethal fractures, conflicts, and explosions (2002: 372).

Dmitrii Bykov's *ZhD* (2006)

Nation: empire, corporation, or diaspora?

In *Mr. Hexogen*, Prokhanov mentions but does not really develop religion into a positive alternative to the brutal logic of the power machine that crushes anything it encounters; the novel's gestures towards the importance of true (religious) belief are too scattered and too whimsical to be taken seriously. The novel does have, however, a figure of the typical Russian *iurodivyi*, a prophet and a fool at the same time, who challenges the iron logic of determination epitomized by empires of various sorts. The novel's holy fool utters barely comprehensible mystical half-sentences

and creates a diffused and convoluted maze of steps, actions, and events. His moves are unpredictable, and his victories seem to be totally accidental. And yet, when Beloseltsev meets him, he cannot resist the spell of the fool's charm. He wants "to absorb, without understating, the wisdom of the fool ... To forget his origin, his name, his sins and failures ... To walk, without memory, without name, down the endless road, with frozen dirt in the wheel track, and a burdock sticking out on a snowy side of the road" (Prokhanov 2002: 15).

The attraction of this resolute rejection of agency has to do with the purposeful de-subjectification that it produces: the state of bliss is achieved through "the tranquility of mind and a complete loss of will," which, in turn, give rise to "a quiet empathy to all those who came into this world ... in order to disappear" (Prokhanov 2002: 15). In *ZhD*, Dmitrii Bykov takes up this theme of social detachment, self-marginalization, and unlocatability, turning it into a major alternative to the brutal competition of the two war-machines organized along ethnic lines. Disinhibition substances, Bykov seems to suggest, do not have to result in frenetic actions, chains of explosions, or enfilades of conflicts. Deliberate inaction and withdrawal could also be a solution.

ZhD can be read as, if not a conscious remake of *Mr. Hexogen*, then, at least, its sequel and epilogue. Given that Bykov and Prokhanov belong to radically opposite political camps, the thematic and ideological similarity between the two novels is all the more striking. Unlike Prokhanov, Bykov is famous for his liberal leanings and his passionate critique of Stalinism. Yet, as Bykov himself puts it in the foreword to *ZhD*, he "was born to create this book" (Bykov 2012: 6), a book that is about the fundamental importance of nationalism in general and ethnic belonging in particular. Ironically, for the empire-loving Prokhanov, with his deep affection for Soviet Communism, nation and national belonging is nothing but another way to mask a cynical fight for power. For Bykov, nationality, or, to be more precise, national origin, is the key identificatory mechanism, the key classification device that slots people into different nations, countries, and military detachments. In a sense, "nation" in *ZhD* emerges as a military category. As an intrinsic element of the language of war, "nation" maps out the disposition of forces – both at the front line and in peaceful settings.

Thematically, *ZhD* traces the same disinhibiting and enabling effects of ideology that I have been discussing. As in the other novels, death acts as the narrative's starting point and its main engine. The first 200 (or so) pages of *ZhD* offer an interesting mixture of reflections, thoughts, and

comments on the importance (and even benefits) of death, dying, and demise in Russia. Radically diverse characters of the novel seem to be unanimous on at least one issue: “Life is a loathsome existence that must be overcome”; “death is the main goal of the proper inhabitant of the country”; “the strategy that our authorities practice in regard to their own people is a complete devaluation of their lives in order to make death appear as a salvation”; “Russian terror grows from below: as soon as the authorities kill or remove a dozen, people start killing themselves by hundreds” (Bykov 2012: 98, 100, 144, 197).

Piled one upon another, these instances of vernacular thanatology initially appear as a fictional continuation of the phenomenon explored by Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share*. Incapable of coping with surplus (of people or resources), societies must learn how to get rid of the excess in order to restore functional balance and to retain the crucial core of the population – be it through mass religious sacrifices and wars (the Aztecs), through resource-intensive external colonization (the Islamic World), or through costly and devastating modernization projects (the USSR) (Bataille 1991). Russians in *ZhD* seem to be doing exactly this, constantly inventing wars in order to shed the “unnecessary” population. As one of the characters puts it, the only thing that seems to be constantly happening in Russia is the “extermination and colonization of people without any sign of progress whatsoever” (Bykov 2012: 136).

Bykov, however, is no Bataille, and *ZhD* is not a philosophical exercise in poststructuralism but a post-communist dystopia. Hence a story about Russians’ self-extinction is quickly transformed into a pan-historical narrative of subjugation. What initially seemed the nation’s self-destructive behavior was, in fact, “a personal biography created in accordance with somebody else’s will” (2012: 501), a form of agency imposed on Russians by alien regimes. A large part of the book is dedicated to an exhausting and repetitive depiction of this process of colonization. Its logic could be easily reduced to the basic narrative of political victimhood proposed not so long ago by historians of Eastern Europe (e.g., Snyder 2010): Throughout their history, Russians have been exposed to a double or, rather alternating, occupation, having to survive between “Stalin” and “Hitler” or, more exactly, between the enemies from the South and the enemies from the North (Bykov 2012: 451). As the narrative goes, the origin of the occupation goes back to the sixth–seventh centuries, when East Slavs (settled around the Volga and the Don) were confronted by the Khazars from the South, who were interested in colonizing the Slavs’ territory. In the tenth century, East Slavs experienced another invasion, this time by groups of

Varangians from the North. The two forms of colonization offered two different models of being. The mobile and nomadic Khazars privileged trade, while the rigidly structured Varangians saw wars and plundering as their main form of employment and their main source of income. Neither regime could win, and the prolonged conflict eventually resulted in a permanent state of mutual containment and coexistence, punctuated by explosions of violence.

The multi-century history of unresolved war, however, significantly determined the fate and the makeup of the Slavs: their radically reduced population was forced to retreat from the public scene (2012: 225–6). The alternating occupation even provided them with some liberation. One of the remaining Slavs delineated the freedom that this double colonial subjection brought with it, “I’d say that they [Khazars and Varangians] live and die for us. So that we, liberated from the base needs, could do something more important. We live a superior form of life that knows neither annexations nor contributions, neither revolutions nor terror. Basically, we live the life of angels” (2012: 219).

However, this *life vne* (Yurchak 2006: 126–57) – that is, life outside political choices and allegiances – this extended history of an imposed state of angelic subjectlessness and denied agency did not last forever. The diasporic existence in one’s own country came to an abrupt end during the period of the “second stabilization.” After Europeans and Americans discovered territories holding massive deposits of *phlogiston*, a gas that completely replaced Russian and Middle Eastern oil, Russia found itself in “a complete isolation that finally gave it an opportunity to play out its grandiose mystery in full” (Bykov 2012: 41).

The mystery was not entirely Russian, though. The end of stabilization caused a radical spike of the old war between the Khazars and the Varangians, a spike that could easily result in the “final solution of the Russian question” (2012: 231). The Slavic “Vas’ki,” blessed and barely comprehensible “angelic” fools gathered by the occupying regimes into special camp-like institutions, became the main target of physical annihilation. After all, as one character puts it, “the land must belong to those who could use it in the best possible way, not to those who were born there” (2012: 433). The survival of the empire required major sacrifices.

As often happens in the ideological novel, a morbid threat of disappearance acts as a disinhibition agent: it pushes some Vas’ki to start a life *on their own* by creating a new (Slavic) man (2012: 232). Volokhov, a Slav, who like Moses decided to nurture the new, *free* generation of Slavs through an extended journey of self-discovery, reflects upon his undertaking, “This is

such a puzzling people. Maybe only 5% of them are capable of meaningful activity. The rest are just wandering around in circles, singing songs, and talking to bushes. They live in a zone of their own. And it is impossible to take them out of it ... We are so vital, it is scary. Yet nothing will happen until these people change. There is only one way to make this change – to wander, to wander, and to wander” (2012: 569).

And wander they do. Making one circle after another, they arrive nowhere while keeping themselves busy. *ZhD* does not really suggest where this circuitous path might lead or what might interrupt this constant spiral dialogue with space. This seemingly aimless rotation, however, does have its own directionality. The circling is a work of the negative; it is a rejection of the models of social organization embodied by the occupiers. Revolving in space, Vas'ki distance themselves from the Varangians' fascination with the ever-expanding empire, which fails to demonstrate any civilizational aspirations and can sustain itself only through the methodical application of brute force. Equally alien to the Vas'ki are the Khazars' attempts to squeeze every social organism into the stifling mold of a dehumanizing corporation obsessed with effectiveness. The hybrid type of social life, “the empire that has no idea of corporation, and a corporation that has no place for freedoms” (2012: 566), is hardly attractive, either.

Demarcating the areas of non-belonging, *ZhD* – like *A Big Ration* and *Mr. Hexogen* – demonstrates the same attraction to and disillusionment with the key concepts available for organizing social life. Three “ethnic” cases (the Varangian, the Khazar, and the Russian/Slav) present in *ZhD* three different ways of translating the call of blood and the power of national belonging into idioms of social organization – be it a militarized empire, a goal-driven corporation, or an internal emigration. Depicting the devastating effects of the iron law of blood kinship, *ZhD* calls for audacity to subvert the predetermination of the national path (2012: 405). Nationality, the novel seems to suggest, is not a railroad (*ZhD*); one can abandon it whenever he or she feels like it. Yet the reactive work of the negative, the logic of withdrawal and abandonment is effective only to a point: the aimless wandering in space might be a good survival strategy, but it is hardly an inspiring model for a good life.

ZhD's refusal to provide a positive solution is a generic quality of the ideological novel. None of the novels discussed here offers an alternative set of ideas, rules, concepts, or conventions that could have replaced the forms of social life that they so successfully critiqued. As one of *San'kia's*

characters puts it, “neither their vision of order, nor their vision of disorder has any distinctive features” (Prilepin 2006: 262). Motivated by their concern with the dissolution of social ties, historical traditions, and individuality, the authors of ideological novels are too cynical to indulge themselves in utopian thinking about possible futures or different social arrangements, yet they are too hurt to let the pain of the recent past simply go away. These “bad books,” nonetheless, do their own, important, work of the negative: they clear the narrative space, demonstrating, once again, that the familiar ways of the ideological critique of the past have been utterly exhausted.

Notes

- 1 The title of the book is a pun: ZhD is a common abbreviation for *zheleznaiia doroga*, railway, but when read phonetically ZhD sounds like *zhidy* (“kikes”), a derogatory term for Jews.
- 2 Pavel Lungin used the book as a backbone for his film *Oligarch (Tycoon: A New Russian, 2002)*, which boosted the popularity of the novel. For an interview with Dubov, see Golitsyna (2013).