Chapter 5:

Alternative Versions of the Past and the Future

Soviet and Post-Soviet Pop Literature

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1. Introduction

Alternate history is a special kind of contemporary fiction and, more broadly, narrative art.[1] It involves depicting historical events in the 'what-if' mode: how the modern world would have changed if one or more key events had played out differently than in reality. Broadly speaking, alternate history, overturning the famous thesis "history knows no subjunctive mood", is concerned with "a comparative analysis of precisely different possible alternatives" (Bestuzhev-Lada 1997: 112–122).

Usually, alternate history works are associated with science fiction and thus with mass culture, although intellectuals also draw upon this approach: in particular, Stephen Fry (*Making History*, 1997) and Philip Roth (*The Plot against America*, 2004), describe in their novels how countries, which in 'our' reality participated in the anti-Hitler coalition, begin instead to undergo political radicalisation in the 1930s-40s, taking on an overt resemblance to fascist regimes. It would therefore be more accurate to say that alternate history is a method of narrative construction, encompassing different types of literature, from mass to experimental. Alternate history echoes in terms of method the work of contemporary historians in the relatively new genre of 'thought experiments' or counterfactuals, which have a similar meaning but are written much more analytically and addressed to an audience of professionals in the humanities.

Furthermore, it is difficult to draw a precise line between ordinary historical novels and alternate history narratives, because any work of fiction with a historical theme is always based on fiction. As the American writer, literary scholar and sociologist Karen Hellekson puts it: a "mere" historical novelist may create a fictionalised maid to a real-life Queen Mary of Scots, but a "normal" narrative about the Queen assumes that her life

1 This essay partly draws on material in a chapter of a collective monograph: Galina, Maria/Kukulin, Ilya (2021): 155–186. Thanks to Vera Dubina and Andrei Zavadskii for permission to use materials from the chapter.

will end at the stake. However, if the novel, for example, reports that Mary defeated Elizabeth Tudor and became ruler of England and Scotland, then we are encountering an alternate history story (2001: 33). Hellekson suggests that alternate history is based primarily on nexuses of key events. In particular, many of the mass-cultural alternate histories in English-language literature rely on two well-known and mythologised nexuses: what would have happened if Germany had won World War II and what would have happened if Southerners had won the US Civil War in the North (Thiess 2015: 8–9).

Such literary works demonstrate, in a particularly poignant way, the creation of a "usable past". The creator of this term, the American critic and literary historian Van Wyck Brooks wrote in 1918 that the contemporary author should give the past a moral meaning that edifies people of the present. Alternate histories contribute to giving such meaning (and in this, writers can differ markedly from historians who create counterfactuals) on at least three levels.

Firstly, they most often portray fulfilled anti-utopias or – less frequently – utopias (Butter 2009), making our reality appear either as the best possible option or a result of an unfortunate accident in comparison with which the imperfections of 'our' world look especially frightening and, most importantly, changeable: had things been a bit different, 'we' could have lived a much better life! A 'past-turned-utopia', as we shall see later, could be the ideal imaginary space for escape from the discomfort of modernity. In cases of anti-utopias, reality is portrayed as relatively acceptable compared to the terrible disasters that could have occurred if events had gone differently.

Second, alternate history authors often establish implicit correspondences between events that actually took place and their 'alternate' versions. For example, Pei-Chen Liao draws attention to the 'realist' aspects of Philip Roth's novel mentioned above: his description of the persecution of the Jews in his fictionalised United States in the early 1940s clearly draws on Roth's experience of childhood suffering from grassroots anti-Semitism in America as described in his memoirs (2020: 11).

Third, alternate history sharply emphasises the impact of personal action and/or chance on large-scale social and political shifts. One of its earliest examples, Lyon Sprague de Camp's novel *Lest Darkness Fall* (1939)[2], tells the story of American archaeologist Martin Padway being transported by lightning from fascist Italy in 1938 to Rome in 535 AD, under the rule of the Ostrogoths. Padway helps the Ostrogoths to defend their kingdom against the Byzantines and the Lombards, thus preventing the onset of the Dark Ages. Obviously, at the time the novel was written, it was read as an allegory calling for personal opposition to fascism.

Accordingly, the American literary scholar Catherine Gallagher writes that alternate history has political significance: "the alternate-history impulse in the Cold War Period and after" was based on "the desire to see the logic of justice triumph over the dynamics of historical determination" (2010: 17). And since contemporary Russia is currently ex-

2 Hereinafter, except where otherwise stated, the year of the first publication of the work is indicated.

periencing a veritable boom in alternate history fiction (in the broad sense)[3], to which both authors with mass appeal and 'sophisticated' writers are contributing, it seemed worthwhile to investigate the socio-historical reasons for such an upsurge more closely. In doing so, we pursue the following initial hypotheses: Alternate history in contemporary Russia is, on the one hand, a special form of reflection on historical traumas, which is akin to the corresponding literature in the West, and, on the other hand, a form of phantasmatic, imagined historical revenge for all events which the authors consider as 'defeats' and manifestations of 'injustice' in relation to Russia.[4]

2. Background to Post-Soviet Alternate History

The thought experiment "what would have happened if" has been posed by many, from Titus Livy (59 BC – 17 AD), who speculated what outcome the war with Alexander the Great could have had for the Roman state, claiming that Rome had every chance of winning this war, to Aleksandr Pushkin in his note on the poem *Count Nulin* (*Graf Nulin*, 1827) (Leibov 2023):[5]

> Rereading Lucretia, Shakespeare's rather weak poem, I thought: what if Lucretia had thought to slap Tarquinius in the face? Perhaps this would have cooled his enterprise and he would have been forced to retreat with shame? Lucretia would not have been slapped […] and the world and the history of the world would not have been the same. (Kibalnik 1995: 64)

However, the French writer Louis-Napoléon Geoffroy-Château (1803–1858) was the first to publish a book of alternate history in 1836, his *History of the World Monarchy: Napoleon and the Conquest of the World* (*Histoire de la monarchie universelle. Napoleon et la conquette du monde*, 1812–1832) – an account of how Napoleon Bonaparte allegedly beat Russia, then conquered all the other countries and created a world state where the arts flourished.

In the first half of the 20th century, alternate history was developed and contemplated by both scholars and fiction writers, including Soviet writers: for example, in 1928, *The Reckless Novel* (*Bestseremonnyi Roman*), co-written by Veniamin Girshgorn, Iosif Keller and Boris Lipatov, was published. Its hero called Roman (in Russian, it is both a male name given to the character and also means "a novel") goes back in time to help Napoleon win the Battle of Waterloo.

In the 1920s, alternate history narratives in both Soviet and émigré Russian literature were perceived as a 'possible' extension of real history, where the course of events could be reversed by chance, as had been shown by the events of the two Russian revolutions of 1917 and of the Civil War. In 1922, the utopian novel *Behind the Thistle* (*Za cher-*

3 See in particular the *Alternate History* (*Al'ternativnaia istoriia*) website https://alternathistory.ru/ [30 September 2023], which has been described as "the largest Runet blog". Runet is a common designation of the Russian sector of the internet.

4 On revanchist motifs in fantasy literature and alternate history in the 1990s and 2000s, cf. Vitenberg 2004; Arbitman 2009.

5 Our dating is guided by this work.

topolokhom) was published in Germany by Pëtr Krasnov, the recent leader of the self-proclaimed Cossack Don state who had just fled Russia. In his novel, he described a world where the Red Army perished under its own bombs and instead of Soviet Russia a patriarchal yet technocratic state emerged, "without foreigners, without speculators, without banks and without the dictates of Western Europe" (Krasnov 1922), but with television and airships to ferry whoever is needed to anywhere in the world. This narrative could be considered the first example of 'imagined historical revenge' in the history of Russian literature, which, as we shall see later, brings it close to post-Soviet mass-cult novels. For example, the commonplace accusation by conservative émigrés that there are too many Jews among the Bolsheviks takes on an inverted form in the novel:

> "Do you have any Jews?" asked Diatlov.
> "How not. They live among us. Where can they go? Only they don't rule over us anymore." (Ibid.)

If we talk about the USSR again, the publication of any works in the genre of alternate history since the 1930s became impossible for a long time. The Soviet authorities positioned science fiction as utilitarian literature, designed to call up young people to work on scholarly and technical innovations. Fiction had to serve propagandistic (educational and enlightening) goals and mainly portrayed the achievements of visionary inventors and the socialist economy. Of particular note are the fictional works depicting the victories of the Soviet Union 'with little blood' in the global wars of the foreseeable future, also a kind of alternate history, designed, however, to demonstrate not so much the randomness of historical choice, as the regularities of the Marxist-Leninist conception of the course of history.

Under these conditions, any somewhat daring intellectual experiments in science fiction were considered dangerous. However, during World War II, when the USSR became an ally of the United Kingdom and the United States, some works of English-language science fiction were published in Russian. Therefore, despite the postwar censorship bans, Soviet readers and writers had some idea of what sci-fi literature could be.

After Stalin's death in 1953, ideological prejudice against the 'dangerous genre' somewhat abated, but the artistic level of works of sci-fi remained very low due to the utter destruction of the genre. Attempts to change this tendency started in the late 1950s, mainly by Ivan Efremov and the brothers Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii. It is indicative, however, that it was precisely alternate history that continued to be perceived by the censors as an ideologically dubious – and therefore undesirable – field of literature. The Strugatskii brothers and Efremov preferred to transfer their dystopian models to imaginary planets – like in *Hard to Be God* (*Trudno byt' bogom*, 1963) and *The Inhabited Island* (*Obitaemyj ostrov*, also known as *Prisoners of Power*, 1969) by the Strugatskiis, or in *The Bull's Hour* (*Chas byka*, 1968) by Efremov – or to unnamed capitalist countries – like in the Strugatskiis' *The Final Circle of Paradise* (*Khishchnye veshchi veka*, also known as *Predatory Things of the Century*, 1965). Characteristic in this sense is the Russian translation of Arnold J. Toynbee's essay *If Alexander the Great had lived on* from 1969, published in abridged form in the journal *Znanie-*

Sila (*Knowledge is Power*) in 1979 (No. 12).[6] In this essay, the British historian returns to the thought experiment once set up by Titus Livy and presents a reality parallel to our own, in which Alexander the Great fulfilled all his plans of conquest, conquering the Qin Empire (the forerunner of China) and creating an everlasting state: Toynbee's narrator reports that he lives in the time of Alexander XXXVI.

This journal publication resounded with readers and, perhaps, also provoked the indignation of the ideological curators so that the editorial board had to hastily organise a round table dedicated to the topic "History – inevitable and accidental" in the next issue, gathering together "real historians" (Podol'nyi et al. 1980). The general verdict of this debate, as one of the participants, Professor G. A. Fedorov-Davydov, summarised it, concluded that "accidents speed up or slow down the course of history, but do not change its direction" (ibid.: 39), criticising Toynbee as an apologist of the decisive role of the individual in history. This critique was an ideological stigma in the USSR, because the crucial role of the masses in history was one of the key tenets of historical materialism (the official ideology of the time), where the individual could not be the creator of history (Marks/Ėngel's 1966: 175–176).[7] This dogma was ineluctable, even though this emphasis on the masses came into obvious contradiction with the cult of Lenin and, at the time, of Leonid Brezhnev.[8]

However, apparently by this time the most open-minded Soviet intellectuals were already seriously interested in the possibilities of depicting alternate historical events. Four years before Toynbee's translation was published, a book by the famous popular historian Nathan Eidelman, *The Apostle Sergei: A Tale of Sergei Muravyov-Apostol* (*Apostol Sergei: Povest' o Sergee Murav'ëve-Apostole*, 1975), had been released with a chapter entitled "Imaginary 1826", which described the success of the Decembrist rebellion of 1825 in Tsarist Russia. The chapter ended with a paragraph of two phrases: "It wasn't. Could have been" (ibid.: 264).

The persistent prejudice of Soviet censorship against alternative versions of history was later triggered by the *tamizdat* (foreign) publication of Vasilii Aksenov's novel *The Island of Crimea* (*Ostrov Krym*) in 1981 by Ardis Publishing, a publisher based in Ann Arbor (Michigan). In the novel, due to a number of favourable circumstances like the absence of the Perekop Isthmus and the decisive action of Aksenov's fictional Lieutenant Bailey-Land, during the Civil War the retreating White Army had defended Crimea against the Bolsheviks. Thus, it became a developed capitalist democracy and the object of envy, lust and hatred of the impoverished 'mainland' USSR. In doing so, Aksenov adopted some of the characteristic Cold War divisions to his alternate history novel, like those between North and South Korea, the FRG and GDR, or mainland China and Taiwan, which is most similar to the fictitious 'capitalist' Crimea. By analogy with the 'other China' that

6 We would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the publisher was a candidate (Ph.D.) of physical and mathematical sciences, rather than a historian belonging to the Soviet professional corporation.

7 First published in 1895 in *Der Sozialistische Akademiker*.

8 Since in Soviet times, the composition of journal issues was approved by the editorial and censorship authorities many months before the issue was printed, the publication bore all the hallmarks of an emergency response launched from above.

was booming in Taiwan, Aksenov came up with an 'alternative Russia'. Apart from the obvious 'anti-Soviet' message (the author portrayed the USSR as a country of total scarcity and the suppression of individual freedom), here the role of the individual is highlighted as the turning point in the Crimean campaign, thus obviously challenging the official Soviet notions of history (Aksenov 1983 [1981]). It sharply contrasts, for instance, with Sever Gansovskii's thought experiment *The Demon of History* (*Demon istorii*, 1968). In this story the protagonist, with the help of some mystical force, visits pre-World War I Austria-Hungary, eliminates the dictator who unleashed World War II, and in so doing brings Hitler to power. The message of this story is unambivalent: the course of history cannot be changed, one personality can be easily replaced by another.[9]

In this context, it is understandable that not only the outrageous *Island of Crimea* could not be published in the USSR until 1990 (in *Iunost/Youth*' 1–5), but also the classic examples of alternate history like Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* (1962). In this novel, a successful assassination attempts on Roosevelt changes history and leads to the Axis countries being victorious in World War II, an alternative that was categorically unacceptable to Soviet ideology, centred as it was on the irrevocability of the victory of the USSR.[10] Therefore, Dick's novel was only published in Russian translation in 1992 – that is, after the collapse of the USSR.

However, Ray Bradbury's famous story *A Sound of Thunder* (1961), in which history was radically changed by a minor intervention in the past, was promptly translated at the end of the Thaw, in 1963. This was possible since Bradbury did not deal with the events of Soviet or Russian history or with events that were somehow sensitive for Soviet propaganda.

3. Trauma and Resentment as a Driving Force of the Post-Soviet Russian Historical Novel

Although the domestic prehistory of post-Soviet alternate history, as we have seen, was sparse, in the post-Soviet space we are gradually beginning to observe its blossoming, unrestricted by censorship and – at first glance – ideological frameworks. This surge has several reasons.

The boom in the 'mass production' of alternate history novels in the former Soviet Union (but especially in Russia) in the 1990s was, of course, partly a 'response' to an unspoken ban on the genre in the USSR, but there were other reasons too. As early as 2002, Boris Vitenberg referred to alternate history in Russian as "a special genre, represented by dozens of names; the number of works of this kind is already in the hundreds." Among the reasons for this demand for the genre, the critic mentions "a natural feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment caused by the brutal, sometimes simply monstrous and shocking realities of Russian history of the past century, which have become apparent to

9 Interestingly, a similar thought can be deduced from Stephen Fry's novel *Making History* (1996).

10 The USSR differed from other socialist countries in this radical extent of censorship: in Poland, for example, thanks to the efforts of Stanisław Lem, a translation of *The Man in the High Castle* was published.

the mass reader." The writings of contemporary Russian "alternative authors," Vitenberg writes, "are successful because they give rise to the pleasant and relaxing illusion that these sad events of the past could have been prevented in some way (ibid.: 315–327)."

The first text in the post-Soviet space that was broadly discussed and reviewed was a short novel by the St. Petersburg (Leningrad) writer Viacheslav Rybakov *The Gravity Plane Tsesarevich* (*Gravilët Tsesarevich*, 1993), which won several genre awards (including a personal award from the famous fantasy writer Boris Strugatskii, the *Bronze Snail*).[11] An anonymous synopsis of the novel, written in 2009 on a fanzine website summarises the novel's main message best and its depiction of a flourishing monarchical Russia in a thriving world:

> […] A world without World Wars I and II, which took the lives of millions of people.
>
> A world without a Bolshevik coup in the early twentieth century. A world without communism. On this Earth, the Russian Empire is leading all countries towards a bright future through modern technology and true ideas of humanism. (Ruddy 2009)

This repetition of "without" in the description of the Russia of the future recalls the previously mentioned émigré novel by Petr Krasnov from 1922: "Russia without foreigners, without speculators, without banks, without the dictates of Western Europe." It depicts a world of high technology without great power rivalry, an arms race and everything we consider frightening but almost inevitable concomitants of modernity and progress.

Rybakov's main protagonist, the State Security Colonel Prince Aleksandr Trubetskoi, investigates the crash of an aircraft, a "*gravilët*" (i.e., with an anti-gravitation engine), which killed a crown prince of the Russian Empire. Trubetskoi discovers that the culprit of the *gravilët* accident was a communist named Kislenko, who staged an act of sabotage and acted in an apparent state of lunacy. Soon, several other distraught communists are caught by Trubetskoi's agents. However, in the world Rybakov describes, communists do not follow terrorist methods – communism is portrayed not as an ideology but a religion, peaceful and utopian, and the "patriarch of communism" is given physical features that resemble Mikhail Gorbachev. Therefore, the actions of Kislenko and other terrorists are clearly not motivated by communist ideology. Looking for the reasons for their lunacy, Trubetskoi arrives at the villa of a certain Albrecht Haushoffer – despite spelling the surname differently, apparently this character's name should refer to the son of the founder of geopolitics, Karl Haushofer. The real Albrecht Haushofer took part in the 20 August 1944 plot, the failed assassination attempt against Hitler, and was killed by the Nazis in Moabit Prison in April 1945 (in Rybakov's novel, Haushoffer's doppelganger was killed there in 1944). In the basement of an elderly aristocrat, Trubetskoi finds a strange construction:

11 Boris Strugatskii was one of the two Strugatskii brothers – the novels they co-wrote were arguably the most popular and well-known works of Soviet fiction. Arkadii Strugatskii died in 1991, Boris Strugatskii, who had since written two novels alone and a memoir about their common literary career, died in 2012.

> Almost the entire space of the room was occupied by a cast-iron monster standing in the middle – an incongruously and awkwardly huge one, […] stitched with vertical lines of rivets, surrounded by a dishevelled tangle of thick and thin, straight and crooked pipes.
>
> It looked more like an enormous steam engine than anything else. It reeked a mile away of the wonders of Jules-Verne-like science. (Rybakov 1997 [1993]: 185)

It soon turns out that hidden inside this apparatus is a reduced, almost microscopic copy of the Earth, inhabited by microscopic human beings. These micro-humans are the guinea pigs in a gruesome experiment launched in the 19th century by Russian revolutionary-maximalist Pëtr Stupak and German scientist Otto Raschke. They created their "parallel world" in order to influence its inhabitants with chemicals and make them willing to give up any human attachments and go to their deaths for the sake of an idea. The beings created in this way inside the "cast-iron monster" unleashed the *real* history of the 20th century, with Lenin, Hitler and the concentration camps. As a result of the continued functioning of this "steam engine," negative psychic energy began to be transferred to the harmonious world of "*gravilëts*," causing random victims to become existentially identified with the most militant inhabitants of "micro-Earth" and to be prepared to carry out unmotivated violent acts. In the novel's finale, Trubetskoi is about to address the UN Security Council with the question of what to do with this horrible device that is inhabited, however, by reasonable and morally responsible beings: technically it could simply be destroyed, but such a solution seems unacceptable to him.

The novel's message can be defined as both psychotherapeutic and escapist. Its main idea can be retold as follows: we live inside a global error, while reality is in fact incomparably more beautiful, albeit unattainable. With such an attitude to history, the authors of alternate history return time and again (a characteristic symptom of 'acting out' historical trauma) to the possibility of building a utopian Russia. They use a variety of events from the early 20th century as 'bifurcation points.'

It is indicative that almost all the changes introduced by the authors of contemporary Russian alternative history prose lead to a radical restructuring of the entire historical picture of the 20th century. Thus, in Iuri Arabov's novel *Collision with a Butterfly* (*Stolknovenie s babochkoi*, 2014)[12] Emperor Nicholas II did not abdicate in March 1917 and remained alive.[13] In the subsequent events of 1917–1918, history takes a completely different path: first the emperor arranges a secret meeting with Kaiser Wilhelm II in Finland and persuades him to agree to an armistice, and then forms an alliance with the Bolsheviks, as a result of which Lenin becomes head of government. Consequently, at the Ipatiev house it is not the royal family that is shot, but members of the anti-Lenin conspiracy, including Sverdlov and Stalin. Trotsky leaves to make a revolution in the United States, while Lenin, though wounded at the Michelson factory, recovers surprisingly quickly and, with

12 First published in *Oktiabr'* 2014: 1–2.

13 Arabov (who died in 2023) was better known not as a novelist, but as a frequent scriptwriter for the famous film director Aleksander Sokurov.

the support of the emperor, hopes "to restore the capitalist market in the country, connecting it with the Soviets" (Arabov 2014: 307) – as betting on the proletariat did not pay off.

At the same time, the Tsar's daughters grow up well. "Tatiana, who is enrolled on a sewing course, has an affair with a schoolteacher who teaches the history of the French Revolution" (ibid.: 309), while his other daughters also have a career. Olga works in the government office, Anastasia married a diplomat and went to England, only the beautiful Maria cannot find a path for herself and smokes "Herzegovina Flor" (ibid.: 310; in the USSR the cigarettes "Herzegovina Flor" were known as Stalin's favourite tobacco products). Moreover, the kolkhozes were never established and Lenin, transformed from a fervent revolutionary into a potential corruptor, "started taking bribes, and that has been the best news of recent months" (ibid.: 323). That is to say, all is not well, of course, but the alternative reality is still better than it could have been:

> The revolutionary impulse, like a volcano, went all to universal education and the GOELRO plan. The latter lit the 'Ilyich bulb' in the backwoods villages, while universal education taught the lazy but savvy people to read and write. Free medicine, run entirely by the state, put an end to malaria and typhus. Education in schools taught reading Tolstoy, Chekhov and Marx. What would emerge from this symbiosis, the Tsar did not know, and was a little worried about the future – was the pot boiling too quickly? The black dishes of loudspeakers hung in the village houses broadcasting news, folk and classical music. From the heights of telegraph poles, too, the radio shrieked. One peasant wrote to him in a letter: 'Put up the speaker. I want to speak into it myself'. (Ibid.: 324)[14]

At one moment, while the bed-keeper was preparing his bed for the night, Tsar Nikolai glanced through an economic report from the Office of the Council of People's Commissars, stating that 1926 industry had reached its pre-war level, i.e., had increased more than fivefold compared with 1921.

Nevertheless, Nikolai suddenly has an unpleasant dream that he signs a renunciation and he envisions everything that followed also in 'real history.' This 'return to reality' is a characteristic narrative move of alternate history. In Russian literature, it is often used as in *Gravilët Tsesarevitch* or in the finale of the novel *The Seventh Part of Darkness* (*Sed'maia chast' t'my*, 1997)[15] by Vasilii Shchepetnev, which will be discussed below.

As we can see from Arabov's novel, the theme of 'Russia without wars and revolutions' is addressed not so much by mass literature as by what might be called 'highbrow' fiction, perhaps because these 'peaceful' fictions do not offer any special adventures or action scenes, and mass literature is not too interested in 'adventures of the spirit'.

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14 A twisted quote from Andrei Platonov's novel *Kotlovan* [*The Foundation Pit*], 1930: "Safronov listened with a sense of triumph, regretting only that he could not talk back into the speaker, to make known his readiness for all activity, for clipping horses, and his general happiness." (Platonov 1975 [1930], 56) This quote further emphasises that the 'alternative Russia' under monarchist rule has all the good that came – or seemed to come – in Soviet Russia thanks to the revolution.

15 First published in *Ural'skii sledopyt* 1998 8–19.

At the same time as *The Collision with a Butterfly*, the story *The Architect and the Monk* (*Arkhitektor i monakh*, 2013)[16] by the famous writer and journalist Denis Dragunskii was published. Here, in 1913 in Vienna's Café Versailles the young men Adolf Hitler and Iosif Stalin meet, talk, go to meetings in socialist circles along with Trotsky, they take turns in the bath, feel something like attraction for each other but it is not for certain, and they argue about a child's teardrop (in fact, Stalin did spend a short time in Vienna in 1913, where he met Trotsky). Trotsky is killed at Lenin's instigation with a meat cleaver, Lenin is drowned in a pond in revenge, Stalin is also hunted, but he escapes and finds refuge in God as a result of the shock. In 1922, terrorists attempt to assassinate not Lenin but the head of the country, Miliukov, who is shielded by Vladimir Nabokov Senior (as was the case in reality – but in Berlin, not Moscow), however, unlike in 'our' world, he survives and becomes Miliukov's successor. In 1937, Hitler is imprisoned for anti-state agitation, in 1938 he is released, meets Eva Braun and invents the "Viennese country style" (Dragunskii 2013: 271). Overall, Dragunskii's 20th century also looks cruel, but still less monstrous than in 'our' reality:

> And Metropolitan Joseph recalled his strange life in his dying hours. […] The underground, emigration, the monastery. What a terrible century, what enormous revolutions and wars! […] Why did they kill the Tsar and his family? Why were so many people put in jail and killed by Thälmann [the leader of the German communists Ernst Thälmann who in Dragusnkii's world came to power in Germany – M.G., I.K.]? And the Russian-German war! Only soldiers killed eight million people, and civilians – it is scary to imagine. And the fate of the Jews? Three million forcibly assimilated, one and a half million resettled, and another one hundred and fifty-six thousand eight hundred and six killed in the massacre of the forty-fourth year […] Horrible, bloody, shameless, cynical and evil century. (Ibid.: 348–349)

Compared to the real losses of the 20th century, the losses of the alternative are more 'modest', but to the protagonist (the author's bitter irony) they rightly seem monstrous – there is nothing to compare them to.

In Aleksandr Sobolev's novel *Gryphons Guarding the Lyre* (*Grifony okhraniaiut liru*, 2020), which is more artistically complex and refined than Arabov and Dragunskii's novels, the action "takes place in Russia of the 1950s, but specifically in a Russia, where the Whites won, the Bolsheviks were expelled to Latvia and are stirring something up from there, where there was neither terror nor World War II and metro stations nestled among the unreconstructed Moscow squares" (Birger 2021). In general, it can be said that the alternative history of 'Russia without revolutions' in the post-Soviet space turns from a *literature of challenge* and *foresight* into a requiem for the unfulfilled golden 20th century, into the *literature of nostalgia*.

There are incomparably fewer sceptical alternative versions, like Vasilii Shchepetnev's story *The Seventh Part of Darkness*, 1997) about the *non-murder* of Stolypin in 1911, which leads to the preservation of the monarchy in Russia until at least 1933. But the result is not very comforting, as a newspaper review of the story summarised it:

16 First published in *Znamia* 2013 1.

> There was no First World War, the country did not become Bolshevik. Emperor Alexei was not very confident but ruling, the biologist Vabilov [an allusion to the great Soviet botanist and geneticist Nikolai Vavilov who died of hunger in a Stalinist prison. – M.G., I.K.] is awarded the Nobel Prize for a universal vaccine, the husband of Nadezhda Konstantinovna [Krupskaia; allusion to Lenin. – M.G, I.K.] is floundering in the Comintern's Radio Liberty in Berlin under Lev Trotsky, Kaiser Wilhelm, who emigrated to Russia, is feeding at the Russian Tsar's court, and in America, the genius Einstein is working with his assistant Semen Blium to create a 'machine for travel through all dimensions', a zero-transportation machine [...]. Nevertheless, the alternative world is going down the drain. Russia, on the brink of a coup, is at war with Kuomintang China and the Comintern entrenched in Germany at the same time. The Russian General Staff, in alliance with Japan, plans to launch military operations against the United States, for which Russian scientists have already developed an 'atomic' (nuclear) bomb. There are plans for a global use of lethal bacteriological weapons created by the same Vabilov. All the main characters of the story are about to die [...]. Blium tries to reverse the course of events by sending 5.2 grams of lead from 1933 to 1911. Stolypin will be assassinated. World history will become what we know from the textbooks. (Larionov 2003)

It is only logical that in addition to 'revisiting the results of the revolution', the authors of alternate history in Russia also address another previously taboo subject: the victory of the Axis countries in World War II (let us call this subgenre alternative Reich studies). However, we do not always end up with the seemingly expected anti-utopia. Tellingly, even such a seemingly radical version ultimately leads in many narratives to a kind of 'humanisation' of the Third Reich.

It is common to trace the beginnings of alternative Reich studies in Russia to Andrei Lazarchuk's novel *The Other Sky* (*Inoe nebo*, 1993), subsequently revised into the novel *All Those Who Can Hold Arms* (*Vse, sposobnye derzhat' oruzhie*, 1997). The bifurcation point here is the successful German campaign of 1941 and Hitler's death in a plane crash in 1942. As a result, Göring takes over power, whose policy towards the conquered territories is much more lenient. By 1991, the world, according to Lazarchuk, is divided between the US and Britain, which is under their protectorate, Japan, which has annexed mainland China, independent Siberia and the Reich, which, as a state formation, is held until 1991 and falls apart as a result of a putsch (an obvious reference to the August Coup in the USSR). Already in Lazarchuk's works, it is depicted how the decrepit Reich gradually loses its aggressiveness.

A few years later, Sergei Abramov's even more radical novel *The Silent Angel Flew Over* (*Tikhii angel proletel*, 1994) appears. Here the USSR surrendered in 1942, but after Hitler's death from a heart attack in 1952, the country regains full independence:

> Over the last twenty years, perhaps, Moscow has grown rapidly upwards; glass buildings, fragile to the eye, forty or more storeys high, impudently encircled the Boulevard Ring, with their golden mirror windows they looked over Chistoprudnyi Boulevard, Rozhdesvenskii Boulevard, Pokrovskii, Strastnoi, Tverskoi and other boulevards, but they did not enter the Ring with fear, the invasion had not yet taken place, the municipality firmly took the architectural virginity of the old center and did not sell any land there. [...] But a good deal of municipal money has been put to good use in the

> restoration of, for example, ancient walls, or on durable asphalt coverings of Moscow streets or on bright electric garlands decorating the eternal Moscow poplars on the same boulevards. So that, then, it was beautiful for all and convenient to live and rejoice… (Abramov 2015)

In other words, the National Socialist regime becomes first and foremost the guarantor of Russia's 'organic' development. The nostalgic message here is undeniable and may well compare with the alternate history versions that erase the revolution of 1917.

As a last example of this strand of literature, one could name the novel *The Sinologist* (*Kitaist*, 2016) by Russian Booker Prize winner Elena Chizhova. The same geopolitical outcome is modelled here with a protagonist, sent in 1983 from the Trans-Ural USSR to the territory invaded by the Reich, now called Russia, who is surprised to notice similarities, at least in the state rhetoric and symbolic language of both countries. In the finale, however, this hero stages a *coup d'état*, uniting the USSR and Nazi Russia into a non-contradictory totalitarian state.

In almost all the works mentioned, the victorious Third Reich is gradually transformed into a less bloodthirsty state. Probably, as observers point out, the belief that any repressive regime tends to soften in historical perspective, especially if it is surrounded by more liberal regimes with which it is forced to interact, is at work. Boris Vitenberg, for instance, directly links the humanisation of Hitler's regime in Lazarchuk's *The Other Sky* to the limited de-Stalinisation that took place in the USSR in the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s. But then he adds an important reservation: "It is indicative, however, that Philip K. Dick […], unlike the later Russian 'alternative', considered – most likely for moral reasons – a serious liberalisation of the Nazi regime, even decades later, almost impossible." (Vitenberg 2004).

However, Russian alternate history prose does not limit itself to the revision of the results of the 20th century, but the whole history of the Russian state is revisited in all kinds of utopia (or perhaps of retrotopia, to use Zygmunt Bauman's neologism). Rybakov, for instance, in co-authorship with the orientalist Igor Alimov under the pseudonym of Holm van Zaichik (in Russian, "zaichik" means "a little hare", and the whole penname imitates the name of the Dutch sinologist and writer Robert van Gulick, the author of detective novels about Chinese Judge Di) have presented the reader perhaps the most ambitious project of the 2000s in the alternate history genre, the seven-volume cycle *Symphony of Eurasia* (*Evraziiskaia simfoniia*) or *There are no Bad People* (*Plokhikh liudei net*, published by Azbuka, 2000–2005). Here the fork that directed the history of Russia in another – incomparably more favourable – way is based on the assumption that the son of the Golden Horde's Batu Khan, Sartaq Khan (died 1256), the sworn brother of duke Aleksandr Nevskii (1221–1263), was not poisoned by his own uncle Berke, but survived to old age, and as a result the Golden Horde (*Zolotaia Orda*) and Russia (*Rus'*) united into a single state Ordus' (van Zaichik 2000–2005).[17] A little later, China and vast territories in the Near and Middle East joined Ordus'. As a result, a great power with three capitals

17 However, modern historians of Medieval Eastern Slavs consider the 'twinning' of Aleksandr Nevskii and Sartaq a fiction put forward by Lev Gumilëv, the author of disputable works on historical themes.

appeared – Khanbalyk (Peking) in the east, Karakorum in the centre, and Aleksandria Nevskaia (St. Petersburg) in the north-west. It is a technically and socially super developed country, which considers the people of the West to be 'barbarians' but, in spite of its multi-ethnicity and tolerance, still bears signs of an archaic society. For example, public corporal punishment and polygamy are practiced here, although, according to the authors, the latter is humanised too.

Each novel in the cycle has a detective story, but as a whole the cycle is frankly presented as a postmodernist literary play, starting from the author's pseudonym to the ironic cultural references, such as the reference to a popular pop song "Unbreakable union of cultural uluses is united forever by Alexander and Sartaq"; these lines are a slightly modified opening of the Soviet Union's anthem (text by Sergei Mikhalkov and Ėl'-Registan). However, in spite of all these playful allusions, the cycle – quite in accordance with the title – can be considered a manifesto of new Eurasianism[18]: it describes a superpower based on the union of the peoples of Russia and Asia and at the same time – very importantly – directed against Western Europe and the ideas of liberalism and democracy associated with it. Regional rulers in Ordus' are not elected, but appointed by the capital's authorities, so residents of the relevant region can only ask the country's top leadership for one or another official to be placed above them – and they are all together called, respectively, not the electorate, but the "demanderate" – from the French verb *demander*, to ask. The state has a special kind of censorship which checks all foreign inventions for their usefulness to the state of Ordus'.

Boris Vitenberg (2004) in his article gives numerous examples of van Zaichik's anti-Western orientation: for example, the Balts deemed "practically barbarians", for they "drink strong alcoholic beverages in the middle of the day", and in general are "thieving people". As a consequence of the "barbarianism" of the Europeans, "the Atlantic world is increasingly becoming […] a technological appendage of Ordus'", which, of course, is a long-standing dream of Russian nationalist technocrats.

The second novel in van Zaichik's cycle, *The Case of the Independent Dervishes* (*Delo nezalezhnykh dervishei*, 2004), combines satire of both supporters of Ukrainian independence and supporters of Chechen independence, for all the disparate nature of these movements and their consequences. The city where the action takes place is called Aslaniv: here the root of the Ukrainian name of Lviv, which in Slavic means "lion", is replaced by the Turkic translation of the same word – "a(r)slan". The Russian and Western human rights activists acting in Chechnya are portrayed in the novel in the comically grotesque image of a Western guest, Valeriia Kova-Levi (a portmanteau made up of the names of Russian journalist and political speaker Valeriia Novodvorskaia, human rights activist Sergei Kovalëv and French philosopher and social activist Bernard-Henri Lévy), who does not understand anything about Ordus' realities. All the opponents of empire in the novel appear to be criminal and dangerous and acting only for the benefit of their own selfishness.

The release of the novels in the Ordus' cycle was accompanied by a hectic publicity campaign and numerous reviews and public reactions. Irina Rodnianskaia (2002) published a review of the novel entitled "Trappers of Advanced People" ("Lovtsy prodvinutykh

18 On Eurasianism cf. Bassin, Glebov, Laruelle 2015.

chelovekov"). She characterises what is happening in Rybakov's and Alimov's novel cycle as "a connection of phobias: *anti-Americanism*, *Ukrainophobia*, *fear of radical Islam*; […] *anti-Catholicism*, *eradication of words of foreign origin*", and comments: "not only Latinisms, Gallicisms and Anglicisms are eliminated [in the language of Ordus'], but also everything that links the Russian lexicon with Hellas – the common European cultural cradle […]." The "phobias" mentioned by Rodnianskaia became dominant, "mainstream" in Russia in the second half of the 2000s and especially after 2014, when Ukrainophobia became part of Russian state policy and rapprochement with China became much more pronounced. In this sense, Holm van Zaichik's novels, whether inspired by political elites or written simply based on a spontaneous sense of conjuncture, anticipated earlier than many others some important political trends that emerged in the early 2000s. In contrast to Soviet times, a literary work of alternate history thus coincides with the state-backed political attitudes instead of contradicting them. But there is also another dimension that probably also contributed to the success of the novel, as Boris Vitenberg noted:

> The reason for the success of van Zaichik's alternative history […] lies on the surface. It is, of course, the 'psychotrauma' of the collapse of the USSR. […] This thoroughness, unhurriedness, paternal concern for citizens is well remembered from Soviet times. And many of its real characteristics as well. (Vitenberg 2004)

4. Our Women and Men Back in the Past

A very peculiar version of post-Soviet alternate history prose is the so-called *popadantsy* literature – a highly widespread phenomenon in Russian mass culture. The word *popadantsy* is derived from the verb *popadat'* (to find oneself somewhere), meaning someone accidently ending up elsewhere in time or space. By and large, there are several thousand novels on the theme of "our man in the past" in the post-Soviet space (Galina 2017). The concept of *popadantsy* is based on the fact that the protagonist in flesh, or by possessing the body of a historical character, gets to a key moment of history and changes the course of events, moving it in a more favourable direction for Russia's prosperity. Statistical calculations made by one of us (Maria Galina) show that the most frequently used periods in which the action of such novels takes place are the rule of Ivan the Terrible, the Time of Troubles, the Crimean and Japanese wars and – to a lesser extent – the October Revolution and the Civil War. We can assume that these periods are so attractive because they are perceived as the most traumatic for Russia's national self-perception – not per se, but thanks to the popular narratives created around them, and partly due to the underlying contradictions in these narratives: the October Revolution is supposedly benign because it created a Soviet state, but dangerous because it meant the destruction of the Russian empire.

However, two trends have been prevalent here in the last decades. One of them is the restoration of the USSR through the incarnation of the protagonist as a contemporary of the 1960s and 1970s. Here we should mention the novel by Sergei Arsen'ev *A Student, a Komsomol Girl, an Athlete* (*Studentka, komsomolka, sportsmenka*, 2012), with the revealing subtitle "Moscow, 1983. Bifurcation" and an equally revealing publisher's synopsis:

> He has lived his life in Russia, which has fallen apart. He has no family or loved ones left. His son died fighting NATO peacekeepers in the streets of Moscow. His granddaughter was killed by thugs who went rogue. His present is poverty and death in the street from a heart attack. But as it turns out, he also has a future. And in that future he is given the opportunity to test whether one man can turn the machine of history around. Not just turn it, but do it without any superweapons or super-knowledge, by the power of his mind and a young girl's body. (Arsen'ev 2012)

Here, as we can see, the vector of resentment is directed not only at the "collapse of the empire", but also at imagined aggression by "NATO scumbags" (ibid.). Mikhail Koroliuk's trilogy on *Quintus Licinius* (*Kvint Litsinii*, 2014, 2016, 2018) with the subtitle "To Save the USSR" or Dmitrii Lazarev's novel cycle *It's Not Too Late* (*Eshche ne pozdno*, 2012–2015) as well as dozens of other novels and series follow the same direction (Viazovskii 2021). Almost all of them aim to save the USSR in one way or another, often by eliminating political reformers (Khrushchev, Gorbachev etc.).

However, the most popular of all historical periods within the *popadantsy* literature is without doubt World War II, of which there are over a thousand texts. These narratives can be grouped into themes, with its time-travelling protagonists being able to be divided into the categories of the intelligence officer, the tank driver, the counterintelligence man and so on. A separate topic are time-travellers visiting Hitler, like the radical nationalist novel duology by German Romanov *Comrade Führer. The Triumph of the Blitzkrieg* (*Tovarishch Fiurer. Triumf blitskriga*, 2012) and *Comrade Führer. Hang Churchill* (*Tovarishch Fiurer. Povesit' Cherchillia*, 2013), published with the following editorial synopsis:

> A new fantasy thriller […], breaking all limits of 'Political Correctness'! Our man at the head of the Third Reich! A Russian hitman in the body of Adolf Hitler! Will he be able to defeat England, carrying out Operation 'Sea Lion' – the invasion of the British Isles? Will he dare to lead a military coup to remove the Nazi Party from power and destroy the SS? Will 'Comrade Führer' be able to prevent a clash with Stalin by preventing Germany's suicidal war against the USSR? (Ibid.)

This is certainly an extreme example of rewriting the Soviet past, although it is not the only one. On the whole, however, the impression is that the majority of works in this pool are aimed at shortening the duration of the war and reorienting (in the most radical cases) the vector of resentment, but not at "abolishing" this historical cataclysm, despite its traumatic nature (Galina 2021). Because, according to sociologists, World War II and its victory – at least in mass consciousness – is the only undisputed "assemblage point" of the nation, a sacred and irrevocable event (Gudkov 2004: 20–58). Today this affective relationship to the past enters a new stage, as for the current Russian authorities the cult of victory in World War II has become a de facto civil religion, protected by a number of legislative acts. Alternate history can only adapt to this trend.[19]

19 One of the most active advocates of such a civil religion is Sergei Cherniakhovskii, professor of political science at Moscow State University and one of the ideologists of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, who was already calling for it as far back as the mid-2000s. Of his numerous publications on the subject, see, for example: Cherniakhovskii 2005.

5. Conclusion

After the collapse of the USSR and the abolition of censorship, most novels in the alternate history genre manifested the idea of a 'lost paradise' or missed opportunities requiring 'correction'. Since the 1990s, a huge body of trash literature has been published in Russia dealing with the intervention of 'our men' (or women) in the past. Attempts to 'correct' the past, in particular to prevent the collapse of the USSR and, consequently, to change the present, have an openly neurotic and revanchist character. As a result, there is a nostalgic trend in both popular literature and more complex forms of fiction; however, popular literature adds a powerful vector of resentment and imagined revenge against Russia's 'enemies'.

This transformation of the alternate history genre into a 'weapon of imaginary revenge' and, ultimately, into a tool for anti-Western and anti-liberal propaganda has institutional backing, especially from big publishing houses aimed at the wider reading public. Unlike the USSR, where almost every version of alternate history contradicted the officially accepted interpretation of Marxist ideology, in contemporary Russia there is little confusion about the idea that history is infinitely malleable and changeable. The vector of resentment that can be traced in the vast body of popular literature in the 2010s and 2020s is very close to the narratives of the pro-state media. However, reviews of these novels on reader forums are markedly polarised, including in their assessments of the authors' political stance. Among the reviews there are quite favourable ones, alongside markedly critical ones, which is perhaps indicative of the fragmentation of the reading community.

In sum, we can say that post-Soviet Russophone alternate history narratives serve different functions, from experimenting with previously taboo topics to replaying traumatic moments of national history and imagining moments of 'historical revenge'. Recent trends put forward 'the logic of justice' and the nostalgic vector, dreaming of a restoration of the USSR and 'how it should have been in *reality*', including the infamous *popodantsy* literature about World War II.

Postscript

This chapter was written prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This invasion was accompanied by a major rebuilding of the Russian political regime, making it not only more aggressive toward other countries, but also more repressive toward many minorities within Russia – such as LGBTQ+ and transgender people, or Jehovah's Witnesses. The public support that the regime enjoyed in Russia during the first years of the full-scale invasion was largely based on the fact that state propaganda capitalised on – and continues to capitalise on – the emotions of post-Soviet ressentiment. Post-Soviet alternate history – as is now clear – was important because it expressed the emotions of the ressentiment in its purest form, except in rare instances of criticizing or analyzing them – in the novels of Elena Chizhova, Vladimir Sorokin, and Roman Arbitman – and, partially, Aleksandr Sobolev.

The term "ressentiment" as a sensible characteristic of the Russia's post-Soviet society was coined by the sociologists of Yuri Levada's circle. Following the annexation of Crimea and invasion in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, it determined the whole framework of their analysis of contemporary Russian society (Dubin 2014). In 2014, Lev Gudkov suggested that the ressentiment he described was the result of the development and delayed "after-effect" of psychological processes that spread in Russian society in the early 1990s: "The collapse of the Soviet order caused extensive anomic processes and a prolonged state of mass disorientation, frustration and erosion of collective identity" (Gudkov 2022: 53–54).

While writing on the first stage of invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Gudkov states: "The traumatic consequences of the loss […] have manifested themselves a generation later in the current explosion of patriotism, which makes sociologists think about the 'long-term' of social change" (ibid.: 127).

The transformation that Gudkov is talking about is worth considering from the methodological perspective of the history of emotions. One of the leading researchers in this field, William Reddy, introduces the concept of *emotive*, which is a description of emotion that simultaneously constructs emotion as a specifically cultural reaction in the consciousness of both the author of a statement (or a text) and his or her addressees (Reddy 2004: 96–111). Research in psychology and sociology shows that complex emotions are much more culturally constructed and much more the result of the subject's personal choices than was assumed previously (Scott 2015). Reddy reveals how a society's distinctive *emotional regime* is constructed, that is, a set of recognised, socially accepted emotional reactions tied to particular situations and communities and "guided" by emotives. The most important role in the production of emotives, as Reddy shows, is played by literature. Pop-cultural Russophone novels in the field of alternative history – not all, but many – can be understood today as *reservoirs of ressentiment emotives*.

The sociological significance of sci-fi for understanding ressentiment in post-Soviet Russia can be indirectly confirmed by the fact that back in 2014, some very popular authors of Russian sci-fi – for example, Sergei Lukyanenko or Vadim Panov – openly supported the war against Ukraine. Moreover, the popular and critically acclaimed science fiction writer Fyodor Berezin might be considered one of the scriptwriters of the early stage of this war – in his dilogy of novels *War 2010: Ukrainian Front* (*Voina 2010. Ukrainskii Front*, 2009) and *War 2011: Against NATO* (*Voina 2011. Protiv NATO*, 2010). These novels depict the takeover of Ukraine by Western countries and the struggle of Russian partisans behind the frontline between NATO and Russia. In 2014, Berezin became one of the leaders of the separatist movement in Donetsk (eastern Ukraine), and for several months was deputy to Igor Strelkov (Girkin) – the 'defense minister' of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. In 2022, Igor Girkin was found guilty by a court in the Netherlands for destruction of the Malaysia Airlines' Boeing 777 crash: he ordered the plane to be shot down with a missile, believing it to be a Ukrainian military aircraft.

Berezin's role as a "scriptwriter of war" was first described by writer and critic Dmitry Bykov (2014), and soon later by journalists Kathy Young (2014) and Pëtr Silaev (2014). In 2016, *The New Yorker* published an interview with Berezin in which he referred to himself

as a "Russian Tom Clancy," (Hitt 2016)[20] but articulated an obvious state of traumatic ressentiment:

> [The Soviet Union] was a special civilization, and now I mourn for it. Russia today is a capitalist country like the United States—not like the Soviet Union, which represented a new type of civilization in which you can live without undermining or exploiting other people. One day I hope it will be reborn. Maybe in some other country. (Ibid.)

One might see here an internal tension characteristic for the post-Soviet Russia's mass culture in general (L'vovskii 2011). Berezin regrets the collapse of the Soviet Union, but at the same time he tries to follow the style of American thriller novels, more precisely, the "technothrillers" of Tom Clancy, whose translations could not be published in the USSR because the writer publicly expressed his dislike for the Soviet leadership (Arbitman 1996).

By studying the evolution of post-Soviet novels in the realm of alternate history, one can reconstruct it as a transformation of ressentiment into the mode of imaginary revenge against the collective West. This visionary revenge was accompanied and fueled by Russia's real wars in Chechnya (1994–1996 and 1999–2009), Georgia (2008), Ukraine (since 2014) and Syria (since 2015).

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20 In our opinion, Berezin's self-comparison with the American writer is wrong, at least because Tom Clancy did not take part in the actions of terrorist groups, but only described their activities – and without much enthusiasm, to put it mildly.

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