

## Chapter 10:

# Nostalgia for Trauma

## Russian Prize Literature and the Soviet Past

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### 1. Introduction

Much, or perhaps even most, of contemporary Russian culture, including literature, can be interpreted in terms of recycling – the ‘recycling’ of one’s own historical, and above all Soviet, experience.<sup>1</sup> This term is convenient as an alternative to the two concepts that are commonly used to describe attitudes to history – “nostalgia” and “trauma”. From the point of view of recycling, history appears primarily as a resource that can be reutilised and resold. Understood in this way, “cultural recycling” is an extremely basic, primal category, not an ideological one like “nostalgia” and “trauma” (Vyugin 2021). The benefit of addressing it lies primarily in the removal of the familiar, albeit more complex, interpretative frameworks.

Recently, Russian writers have displayed a great interest in the Soviet ideological and aesthetic experience, which is especially evident in the phenomenon that can be roughly called ‘prize literature.’ Over the past two decades, the institution of Russian literary prizes have proved to be an effective tool for shaping the writers’ ‘elite.’ Award nominations, of course, are not always and by no means the only important criteria for a writer’s significance. However, prize literature – at least, within the domestic context – is extremely influential. Although its audience is not large compared, for example, with that of popular television shows and blockbusters, it actively participates in the circulation and production of topoi that are characteristic of popular mainstream culture. Some of them will be discussed in more detail in this essay.

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The institutional mechanisms of Soviet and contemporary Russian literary awards have not yet been studied in detail (Svin'in/Oseev 2007; Akhmanaev 2016; Zubkov 2021; Gorski 2023). While this aspect is undoubtedly important, this essay does not address questions of the sponsoring, nominating and selecting of finalists nor the question, to use a well-known aphorism, 'who judges whom?'. The focus is not on what James English calls the "cultural economics of prizes and awards" (English 2005: 4), but on literature as such, on the literary works themselves, which have been selected according to certain criteria, and as a result form a specific 'genre' that is shaped not by the authors, but by the prize jury. This essay examines several works of such prize literature that meet these criteria. In doing so, it is important to emphasise that the rather complex process of selecting and nominating certain literary works directly influences the career success of authors in the genre of prize literature. Prize literature is the specific result of those who, among other things, endorse and promote certain trends in contemporary literature.

To interpret such trends, this essay analyses selected literary works that were included in the 2019 longlists of arguably Russia's four most prestigious literary prizes: *Bol'shaia Kniga*, *Natsional'nyii Bestseller*, *NOS* and *Iasnaia Poliana*. This small selection of award-winning literature reflects not only one year's performance but a general trend in contemporary Russian literature over the past decade. Moreover, it is worth taking into account the specificity of 2019, which I could not imagine when I started, at the beginning of 2020, to read and write about the latest prize-winning novels. Indeed, this undertaking would ultimately turn out to be a dive into a preapocalyptic culture. Back then, I only vaguely felt what now becomes more and more obvious to me: the ideas and emotions of this kind of fiction from 2019 absorbed, if not foreshadowed, the upcoming catastrophic future, and today, at least, can contribute to a better understanding of why the social cataclysm which followed the pandemic became possible.

About a third of the overall corpus of prize literature of 2019, comprising almost a hundred texts, is represented by works which can be categorised as a "retrospective genre", i.e. a genre which includes historical novels and "novels of the recent past" (Fleishman 1971: 3). These are either explicitly historical narratives or narratives in which history occupies a central position. The vast majority of them refer to the Soviet period in one way or the other, and when one considers that other writings – novels and stories about modernity, future worlds or fantastic tales – also refer to the same time period in many cases, the picture becomes even more impressive: at the beginning of the 21st century Russian literature is obviously actively recycling the Soviet past.

The focus therefore will be on authors whose works deal with the Soviet past. The essence of the trend they reflect can be characterised as an ongoing attempt to 'harmonise' and 'normalise' Soviet history, to mask all contradictions, and to find something positive even in the seemingly worst stories. It is also important to note that this rhetorical strategy is not carried out through explicit declarations, but latently, through a kind of suggestive poetics that sometimes may not even be fully reflected by the author himself. The literary works examined here are also united by what can be broadly described as allegorical poetics: a very significant part of contemporary Russian literature, which aspires to the status of 'serious' literature, seems to be governed by it. This technique is reminiscent of the traditions of Soviet literature, drawing on both socialist realist and more recent aesthetics, though of course it is not a unique post-Soviet phenomenon, but

a general characteristic of the global literary mainstream. Moreover, the selected works resemble what Boris Engel'gardt (1924) in analysing Dostoevskii's work, called the 'ideological novel', wherein one can easily identify certain ideas behind the main characters. In rhetorical terms, the characters serve as examples illustrating – metaphorically, metonymically, or otherwise – a general thesis. In other words, these novels feature in addition to the usual story a more or less developed 'allegorical plot' – a gradually unfolding argument in defence of a certain ideology and ethical values. The reader is invited to identify them as a specific intellectual and aesthetic exercise. This essay focuses on these ideological presuppositions inscribed into the narratives through the 'enigmatic' way of an 'allegorical plot'.

No less interesting, however, are the ethical premises on which these narratives are based, which are not necessarily included deliberately, but always at least unintentionally (Booth 1961). If, from the point of view of allegorical hermeneutics, literature about the past can be described as intellectual entertainment, from a rhetorical perspective it turns out to be a very serious matter, serving the formation of identity and social consolidation. But what are the ideological and ethical presuppositions with which the authors of the selected literary works seek to consolidate their readers' attitudes and which literary devices do they employ to achieve this? These are the questions that will be discussed in this essay.

## 2. Idyllic Stagnation

It is to a certain extent unsurprising that the so-called period of stagnation of the 1970s–1980s is mostly represented as a harmonious time. If we look at the 2019 prize literature, the most telling illustration of this observation is perhaps the novel by Vasilii Aksënov, *Ten Visits of My Beloved* (*Desiat' poseshchenii moei vozliublennoi*, 2018), which was included in the 2019 Iasnaia Poliana longlist.<sup>2</sup> It is an autobiographical novel, and, if we relate the situation to the Soviet tradition, a kind of new village prose.

'Ancient' Russian history is presented by Aksënov as a Golden Age: "Our ancestors, the Cossack pioneers, knew how to choose the place where to build" (Aksënov 2018: 17), but the story set in the Soviet time is also quite idyllic in the way it portrays the period. This depiction clearly contrasts with the personal melodramatic plotline, which is based on a story of unhappy adolescent love. Aksënov's village exists almost outside of Soviet ideology, almost beyond politics and even agricultural production. The author of the novel is more fascinated by the leisure culture of its inhabitants than in the 'battle for the harvest'. Social conflicts are depicted as coming from the outside into the community's life: "Only my Ialan is falling apart, it's a pity [...] after the announced enlargement. And who invented it? Some enemy. Someone, but no one from Ialan" (Aksënov 2018: 17–18). Group

2 According to the author's dating the novel was written in 2009–2010. It was first published in 2011 in *Moskva* magazine (No. 1/2), and the author won the magazine's award for best publication of the year. In 2014, a play based on the novel was staged at the Maiakovskii Moscow Academic Theatre with the title *V.O.L.K. (That's What Love Is)* (*V.O.L.K (Vot Ona Liubov' Kakaia)*), directed by Svetlana Zemliakova. The first book edition was published in 2015, the second in 2018.

conflicts, for example, over the honour of a village girl, are also provoked not by their own people, but by outsiders. Even vehement arguments about the painful past, about Stalin, do not turn Aksenov's characters against one another, even if one is a convinced communist and the other is a believer and former kulak, a victim of the Bolsheviks' policy. After each quarrel the characters reconcile with each other. Apart from an unfortunate teenage crush, life in the Soviet countryside according to Aksenov appears quite prosperous.

But even when the author is clearly concerned with demonstrating the hidden conflicts of the Soviet system, the portrayal may end up being similar. In the novel *Verification Bureau* (*Biuro proverki*, 2018), for example, the officiousness and internal social contradictions are numerous.<sup>3</sup> This 'urban Moscow' novel by Aleksandr Arkhangelskii was short-listed for the *Bol'shaia Kniga* Award in the 2017–2018 season, and a year later, in 2019, for the Iasnaia Poliana longlist. The main tension in the novel emerges as a confrontation between the party-state apparatus and the intelligentsia and all the other plotlines in Arkhangelskii's piece of art are based on this. And yet, Arkhangelskii, like Aksenov, manages to resolve the conflict. *The Verification Bureau* is essentially a novel about unity, – unity which is achieved on 27 July 1980, the day of Vladimir Vysotskii's funeral, functioning as a symbol that reconciles all the 'actors' of late Soviet history. In the final scene, the narrator – who is also the main character – witnesses the coffin of the deceased poet being carried through the city. Someone in a large crowd hands out Vysotskii's poems, and a policeman holds out his hand for them: "But you are, excuse me, the police!" The policeman blushed. – 'And what,' he asked offended, 'do you think policemen aren't human?'" (Arkhangelskii 2018: 412) Arkhangelskii combines the utopian character of the phrase "the policeman blushed" with an apocalyptic expectation of a 'new world' to come – some fundamental social changes. Thus, contemporary Russian prose settles every conflict situation and attempts to harmonise history.

One motif that concerns both authors of these 'stagnation' novels is religion. In Arkhangelskii's work, the conflict of antagonistic social groups also means a religious opposition to the atheist state. Moreover, the topic of religion in *The Verification Bureau* is so crucial that one gets the impression that all private and public life in the Soviet Union revolved, if not exclusively then mainly, around this question. In *Ten Visits to My Beloved*, by contrast, religion is not brought to the forefront. Aksenov mentions it rarely, but each reference is symbolically weighty. His characters, who argue vehemently about Stalin, are wary of arguing about religion.

Aksenov and Arkhangelskii are by no means unique in their attention to this motif. Contemporary Russian literature in general draws extensively on this previously taboo subject. But what is new is that religion in these works turns out to be a part of the harmoniously constructed past. This aspect also characterises the novels discussed below, which focus on other periods of Soviet history.

The fact that in this 'stagnation' literature the late Soviet era is often portrayed as relatively prosperous is hardly surprising. But it is worth remembering that under the conditions of censorship during the Brezhnev era the Stalin regime was also not depicted as particularly disastrous. The situation did not change significantly until perestroika,

3 The novel, according to the author, was written between 2014 and 2018. It was first published in 2018 in the journal *Oktiabr'* (No. 3/4).

when it was mostly shown as a traumatic period, while today, after a different historical-political turn, there is a pluralism of different positions, to which award-winning writers have contributed.

Many of them are by no means inclined to present the pre-1953 Soviet Union as a conflict-free environment. The repressions and their consequences are often described in such detail that this literature may well be called 'traumatic'. This leads to the curious and, at first glance at least, paradoxical situation that this 'traumatic' literature, which highlights the dark sides of Soviet history, at the same time promotes the normalisation of that history, a constellation worthy further consideration.

### 3. Peacemaking Pantheism

Guzel Yakhina [Guzel' Iakhina] occupies a special place among contemporary writers who made it into the circle of prize-winners in 2019. She is truly a bestselling author, whose works are discussed not only by experts or in literary circles. Yakhina's novel *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, 2015) was turned into a television series in 2020 and aired on the TV channel Russia-1. The series immediately became the subject of a heated public debate with some even calling for the series to be banned. As for the awards themselves, Yakhina is a regular on domestic shortlists. Her award-winning second novel *A Volga Tale* (*Deti moi*, 2018), discussed below, was written after *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, but is no less, and perhaps even more, revealing in its theme of Soviet history under Stalin.

The novel, as already mentioned, is written in an allegorical manner typical of many contemporary authors, including Aksenov and Arkhangelskii. Only the degree of its symbolism clearly exceeds the norm. Yakhina's eventful plot – unlike, for example, Aksenov's account of everyday life – is almost entirely subordinate to the allegorical message. Since the mid-1970s, Soviet literary critics have referred to a special genre, the 'novel-parable,' which unites such diverse authors as Vasil' Bykaŭ, Chingiz Aitmatov, Bulat Okudzhava and many others. Yakhina's work, perhaps, embodies the qualities of this genre to an even greater extent.

*A Volga Tale* made the longlists for the 2019 *Natsional'nyii bestseller* and Iasnaia Poliana awards and was ranked third among the winners of the 2018–2019 *Bol'shaia Kniga* season. The novel spans two decades, from 1918 to 1938, but the story is also accompanied by references to both the more distant past and a brief excursion into the characters' future.

Throughout the entire novel, Yakhina's narrative is devoid of any complacency: a love story unfolds against the backdrop of a brutal revolutionary reality. Meanwhile, the immediate prehistory is again characterised as "calm, full of penny joys and little worries, quite satisfactory. Somehow happy" (Iakhina 2018: 24).

Yakhina's protagonist, a young German teacher named Bach, leaves his community together with his beloved Klara – because the community did not accept the young people's relationship – to settle some distance away, on a farm on the other side of the Volga. The characters thus drop out of society, and even time begins to flow differently for them, as their connection with the real calendar is gradually lost. This is one of the basic devices

in the novel: the author replaces the historical, objective time in the spirit of 'neo-mythological' poetics or magical realism with 'legendary', symbolic time.

The fugitives are occupied only with themselves, so much so that even the continuation of their family seems not only unnecessary, but also undesirable. The hero only visits his former neighbours when necessary, each time witnessing the changes taking place in the abandoned settlement. Thus, the narrator, or, more precisely, the author<sup>4</sup> describes the Sovietisation of the Volga region from the perspective of a – in the sense of Viktor Shklovskii – 'defamiliarising' observer. This is the second characteristic device used by Yakhina that determines nearly everything in the novel.

A turning point in the novel is a bandit attack, which Bach is unable to prevent. His beloved was raped. That is, an outside force invades the lovers' asylum and destroys their idyll. After that, *A Volga Tale* turns mostly into an account of regular violence, which, although primarily inflicted by the new authorities, is also caused by the acts of ordinary people. *A Volga Tale* concludes with a phantasmagoric allegorical scene, in which the hero, plunging into the Volga, observes the riverbed filled with the victims not only of Soviet but also of Russian history: at the bottom of the Volga, he sees an endless row of dead people and animals as well as artifacts. Moreover, all these bodies and items have not decomposed despite the passing of time.

Thus, violence, brutality, and confrontation form the basis of Yakhina's novel, as if to dispose the reader to fear and reject Soviet history, assuming, of course, that violence is meant to deter. But around this chronicle of violence, Yakhina constructs her own 'historiosophy', in whose light terror looks somewhat different. Apart from her main character, the former teacher Bach, who has a marginal social status, Yakhina devotes quite a lot of attention in her novel to the person who held the highest position of power in the Soviet Union, namely Stalin. Yakhina's Stalin possesses traits that are quite often attributed to him. He is extremely suspicious, it is impossible to contradict him and it is better to anticipate his wishes even regarding trivial things. For example, although he firmly decides on a particular carp for dinner, the cook prepares him three different ones, since the leader can change his mind at any time. In addition to these generally known character traits, Stalin is also depicted through allegorical gestures, among which relations with animals, especially fish and dogs, occupy a special place. Stalin feeds the carp, personifies them and treats them as he treats people: he encourages the most zealous one, the one that grabs the feeder by the finger, and then demands that the fish be fried. The dictator repeats the same experience with a pack of feral dogs, whereby he is also attacked and, on this occasion, much more seriously.

Yakhina's Stalin fails to tame animals, but it is obvious from the novel that he is a much more successful tamer when it comes to people – primarily those close to him who set the mechanisms of terror in motion. In this sense, for example, Ezhov in Yakhina's novel becomes the first contender for the role of the zealous carp, which is about to be delivered for frying. This extended analogy is only one of the allegorical links in the chain

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4 It is important for me to disavow here a well-known opposition between the terms 'author' and 'narrator', stressing the fact that, ultimately, it is the author (writer) who is responsible for the ideas and values which she or he imposes upon the reader. In this respect, my approach is close to the "optional-narrator theory" (Boyd 2017; Patron 2021).

of figurative identifications – identifications and oppositions – in which the specificity of the author's axiology in relation to the subject of the story, that is, national history, is expressed most clearly.

If we start again with Stalin, there are clearly two figures alongside him, literally, in the text: One extremely famous, Hitler, and the other less well known, a man named Chemodanov, who teaches Stalin billiards in between matters of national importance.<sup>5</sup> From the point of view of the author, which is expressed stylistically, Hitler clearly loses out to Stalin because the latter is endowed only with minor negative connotations. Hitler is discredited *ad hominem*. For example, in contrast to the Soviet dictator, the *Führer* is portrayed as hysterical: "Hitler is insane, hysterical and an undoubted demagogic genius [...]" (ibid.: 458). Stalin, on the other hand, is in most instances characterised either neutrally or complimentarily, despite his inherent fear: Whatever he may be, he stands above everything, with Yakhina constantly repeating the word 'leader'.

At the same time in the novel, Hitler remains the only equal political rival to Stalin, against whom the Soviet dictator is literally and figuratively still learning to 'play'. Chemodanov, a billiards genius, helps him in this business. During one of the games with him, Stalin finally overcomes his master in a game of billiards and simultaneously, imagining that Chemodanov is Hitler, acquires a certain feeling – 'courage' – which, the author believes, will give him an undeniable advantage over his enemy in the coming great war. Yakhina's Stalin has no doubts that the war will take place, which makes him a shrewd (complimentary rhetoric) politician. Yakhina uses the war as an ethical motif by which to evaluate all of Stalin's activities, including repression, as they occupy much of the writer's attention.

Yakhina's form of evaluation of Stalin's character implies a suggestive strategy rather than an explicit ethical judgment. On the basis of the central text fragment in which the author's position is expressed, it is impossible to say clearly whether the idea of unity being used as a justification for oppression when faced with an imminent military threat should be attributed to the character, the narrator or the author. I am specifically referring to the following phrase: "Only by cleansing the organism of sores and ailments can one expect to win the inevitably approaching war" (ibid.: 461). In other words, we have a narrative which looks too much like a legitimising narrative typical of the oppressor's discourse about terror, which necessarily discredits the victim of this terror, presenting them as an enemy and depriving them of their human qualities.

The fact that in this dual situation the reader is left to make an ethical choice on his own is not so important for understanding the axiology of the narrative. The main thing, as far as the latter is concerned, is that the ambivalence of Yakhina's expression of the author's position takes Stalin and Stalin's repressive policies out of the category of unconditional, absolute, evil. The ethics manifested in the novel allows for the possibility of repression. The absolute evil is attributed to the external enemy, Hitler – a character who appears episodically and plays a service role. The future war also appears in the novel only when the author makes an ethical – not accusatory and therefore already apologetic – assessment of Stalin.

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5 This fact is most probably fictitious.

The dictator's other opponent in the novel is, of course, the Volga German Bach, who fulfils this role, however, only on the allegorical level of the plot: the characters never meet, and Stalin certainly knows nothing about Bach. The characters, who are situated at opposite ends of the social ladder, are initially opposed to one another, although this conspicuous antagonism is again not so unambiguous.

In a sense, *A Volga Tale* is a hagiography of Bach: an account of the hermit's movement toward some truth of life, to sanctity. Bach begins his reclusive journey by serving his only woman, Klara. The climax of his feeling is when Klara, who died just after giving birth, is placed in the ice shed, and the hero realises that this is exactly what he has always strived for: to contemplate his undying beloved. He understands that this is the only thing he ever really wanted. At the same time, from this moment on he must look after the child she left to him.

Bach, who at first dislikes the child of an unwanted pregnancy caused by rape, gradually focuses all his attention on caring for it. Soon, another child appears in the house – an orphan, to whom Bach is also averse at first, but slowly Bach gets used to seeing him at the farm. Now the hero serves the two children. The orphan who appears in Bach's home is also a phenomenon of the new world (the world which once already destroyed Bach's idyll), so he begins to serve the children of revolution and modernisation, and gives himself to this cause wholeheartedly – first on the farm, then in the orphanage where the children are taken, and then in other, somewhat more distant places.

In this manner, Yakhina connects Bach, children and revolution in a demonstrative way. The protagonist makes his 'contract' with the Soviet regime immediately after the loss of his beloved: to obtain milk for his infant, he composes fairy tales, which the local activist uses to agitate for the new regime among the main character's former neighbours.<sup>6</sup> In the last episode of the novel, Bach also sets up an orphanage in his own house, no longer for his two wards, but also for other children.

Finally, having accomplished his mission – raising his wards and building a common home for others – he readily accepts his fate to end his life in the camp: "I am ready," he claims during his arrest (*ibid.*: 484). Thus, Bach, who rebels against his own ethnic community at the beginning, becomes a convinced builder of the new, Soviet world and a 'convict' at the same time by the end of the novel.

He builds an order in which he himself has no place. Even his two children, having found themselves in a Soviet orphanage, soon stop thinking about him. In Yakhina's novel, the children are happy, interacting with their peers, and they do not need anyone else. In a key scene of happiness, the adults beside them are simply absent: "By the gleam in their eyes he felt: here they are happy" (*ibid.*: 437); "Laughing, hurrying, bumping foreheads and laughing again. There were no adults" (*ibid.*: 430). That is, the author portrays a real utopia of childhood and the orphanage.

It is precisely in this role of selfless servant to the new regime that Bach is equal to Stalin: one readily sacrifices others for the sake of a certain unity, the other does not hesitate to sacrifice himself. (As the iconic Soviet comic character Iurii Detochkin would

6 "Tales" refers to the collection of Leonid Lerd (1935), a reference which the writer does not hide. In particular, the book mentions the 'storyteller' Hoffmann, the namesake of one of Yakhina's characters.

say: “And together we make a common cause: you in your own way and me in mine.”) In other words, Yakhina, in her novel about Stalinist repressions, is implementing the same strategy of ‘normalising’ Soviet history as the prize-winning authors who write about the ‘calm’ Brezhnev era, albeit in a somewhat more elaborate way.

It is not difficult to see this if one again pays attention to the ‘animalistic code’ in the novel. In Yakhina’s work, it is not only Stalin, but also Bach who interacts with wild animals. In one episode, when Bach is wandering in the steppe between the farm and the village, he runs into a pack of wolves. The wolves run across the steppe, approaching Bach, but instead of attacking him, they simply ‘streamline’ him from all sides. If we proceed from the gift of taming animals, Bach – a kind of Francis of Assisi or Egorii the Brave – wins in a tacit contest with the dictator. Ultimately, the symbolism of emotions separates the leader and the outsider: Bach, who is afraid of losing his beloved more than anything else in the world, loses his fear by the finale, while Stalin, on the contrary, experiences it constantly, albeit concealing it from others. In this way, the idea of total violence as an ethical value loses out somewhat to the idea of personal sacrifice. But in a didactic and instructive sense this means only one thing: Yakhina teaches humility. The author offers nothing else in her novel equal to these two ethics (for example, the ethics of rebellion). The only ethical reference point remains the harmony between the executioner and the victim.

In Yakhina’s novel, the truth of this new world, for which some killed and others sacrificed themselves, is unambiguous. When Bach’s two children of the revolution are grown up, having had so far a quite shabby and crippled life (Iakhina 2018: 485–486), they eventually meet to spend the rest of their days together, in a sense echoing the fate of Bach and Klara. At least, this is how the cycle of the family saga closes.

The final scene in *A Volga Tale* – the one in which the hero plunges into the Volga, can be easily read as a manifesto of pantheism – a hymn to nature, which equates and includes everyone and everything, friends and enemies. Drowning in the Volga, observing history and grasping its truth, the hero feels that he simultaneously merges with the whole earth: “His toes were carried to the quiet backwaters of Sheksna and Mologa [...] his hair – spread out on the Akhtuba, dipped end into the Caspian Sea. Bach dissolved into the Volga” (ibid.: 483). In other words, one kind of religious discourse, the Christian one, has just been replaced with another, ‘pagan’ one.

#### 4. The Geopolitics of Eros

In the novel *Paradise on Earth (Rai zemnoi)*, 2018) by Sukhbat Aflatuni, which was shortlisted for the *Bol’shaia Kniga* Award, the repressive past is a seemingly negative phenomenon: at least one of its main characters – though not the main one – is entirely immersed in the work of exposing the crimes of the repressive regime. Taken as a whole, the novel depicts Soviet history, starting with the 1930s and ending in the early 2000s – in the final scene, we hear the 2004 song *Black Boomer (Chernyi Bumer)* by Seëga which was very popular at that time. The main character Pliusha grows up in the Brezhnev period. At the same time the novel features important secondary characters. One of them belongs to the generation socialised during the Stalin period, another – to the generation socialised during

the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods. Thus, the main character is dragged into the ideological and ethical clash between these generations, and this generational confrontation serves as the main plot of the novel, which, just as the novels previously mentioned, also has an allegorical level.

At the beginning, the action unfolds within the framework of interpersonal relations, touching upon gender rather than historical and political issues. The main character has a close female friend. When it comes to their attitudes toward men, the two girls differ from their peers. They do not want to get married and in general, their relations with the 'strong' sex are not easy. At the same time, they are opposites in terms of character: if Pliusha is an introvert, her friend Natali is very active and sociable and not averse to the pleasures of life, except for sex.

In its most extreme form, gender conflict manifests itself in Natali's story. One day, when Natali comes home from a party, she is attacked and raped by a local guy called Grisha. However, Natali, who is strong by nature, is not distressed for long, but learns karate and beats Grisha unconscious, only just refraining from depriving him of the signs of manhood. Grisha, in turn, coming out of the hospital, begins to pursue Natali again, and one day he almost catches up with her. The conflict is finally resolved only after the death of the male character for reasons beyond the woman's control. The relationship between Grisha and Natali is, of course, a typical rape-revenge story, a plot about a woman's vengeance on her abuser. However, it also has an allegorical meaning, which only becomes apparent towards the end of the novel, an aspect to which I will return.

Pliusha, on the other hand, has a different paradigm for communicating with men. She gravitates toward artists and intellectuals, humanities scholars, and somewhat older men. Relationships with them do not lead to sexual intimacy, although the affectionate touches of one of them, a teacher and academic supervisor at the institute, at least at first, do not disgust her. At the climax of the novel, Pliusha unexpectedly finds herself caught between two men – mentors, people of different generations (the generation of Stalin and Khrushchev-Brezhnev) who, having been friends and even co-authors for a long time, suddenly break off all relations. Moreover, the case ends with a public slap in the face. Thus, a political and historical conflict related to the theme of repression breaks into the narrative: the reason for the end of the friendship is that the younger scholar discovered that his older colleague was involved in the execution of the Polish population living in the city until the 1930s. Not yet aware of the reasons for the quarrel between the two men, Pliusha gradually begins to distance herself from the compromised hero, switching over to the side of the indignant truth-seeker. This manifests itself in her losing interest in art history and choosing a new supervisor, a historian-archivist, to investigate the mass murder of the Poles together with him.

As in Yakhina's case, Aflatuni presents the events from the point of view of a naïve 'ordinary' hero, who clearly does not understand what is going on, in a way that avoids making ethical judgments about the actions of characters and events in real history. His text, like Yakhina's, lacks clear markers that clarify the point of view of the narrator, and thus of the implicit or biographical author. The reader is given the chance to make their own choices, which of course they will make in accordance with their ethical and ideological background. For instance, after a certain period of successful activity, the truth-seeking character, whom Pliusha assists, begins to have difficulties. A new chief appears

who, unlike him, believes that: “There is no need to imagine that some were only executioners and others only victims. We need to show everything in a more complex, broader way” (Aflatuni 2019: 196). The reader is quite free to identify with either point of view, accepting or not accepting them.

The fundamental ambivalence of the narrator’s position allows each interpretation. At first glance, Aflatuni perceives his truth-seeking hero positively – already by virtue of the fact that he rebels against detected injustice and ‘meanness.’ This gives reason to think that the narrator ethically stands and, in this sense, identifies with the inquisitive historian, attracting the reader to his side as well. To put this in other terms, in the eyes of the author, Pliusha’s new supervisor, a historian, ethically surpasses his predecessor, the art historian and, as we already know, traitor. This ethical hierarchy, exactly as in Yakhina’s case, is supported by using the rhetorical device *ad hominem*. If, in Yakhina’s novel, Hitler looks worse than Stalin because he is explicitly hysterical, in Aflatuni’s narrative, the art historian is worse not only because he is a traitor but also because he is older.

Aflatouni emphasises that his heroine, the unaware Pliusha, is uncomfortable with the signs of old age that she notices in her first mentor, the art historian: “When he first embraced Pliusha, she was frightened by the pungent smell of tobacco and old age” (ibid.: 26). In contrast to this negative physical attraction between Pliusha and her first mentor, her connection with her second mentor, the younger archivist and historian is purely intellectual or ‘spiritual’.

But this obvious assessment is only one side of the coin, with the allegorical plot complicating the picture. As we know, Grisha rapes Natali. However, this is not self-sufficient violence, but violence with a special ‘historiosophic’ meaning. Aflatuni mentions that Natali is of Russian origin, from the Cossacks, while Grisha turns out to be a Pole: “We are Poles. – Anton slows down slightly. – Poles [...]” (ibid.: 44). Moreover, Grisha catches up with Natali not just in some wasteland, but in a field where the grave of his compatriots executed in the 1930s is located. It is a sexual act on a grave – a motif not common in Russian and Polish literature but one gaining popularity today.

This means, the rape can be read on an allegorical level also as Polish revenge against the Russians for the crimes committed by them in the 1930s against the Poles. This revenge can hardly be called successful, but it is not completely unsuccessful either. A child does not appear in this case, but there is a ‘sodomasochistic’ connection between the characters after this encounter, at the breaking off of which the heroine feels a distinct sense of loss. And after finding out about the death of her ‘offender’, Natali immediately proposes to marry his older brother. Thinking of this in terms of geopolitical abstractions – the Russian offers to create a family for the Pole. Such a Russian-Polish relationship does not cease to be a love-hate relationship, because in response the Pole offers the Russian a bowl of soup into which he pours a glass of salt, and in the end, plagued by nausea, they eat the soup together and the matter ends in marriage.

The unity between the Russian and the Polish nation is also realised in another form, not erotic, but thanatological. Before dying of illness, Natali demands that her friend scatters her ashes over the wasteland where the Poles are buried. In death and in nature, Aflatouni thus argues, all are equal. Putting it all together, the reader is faced at this moment with the same concept of pantheism which we witnessed in Yakhina’s novel.

There is little to be added to this finale. Unlike Yakhina, in Aflatuni's novel, the final harmony, however, is achieved within also religious, but this time again, like in Aksenov's and Arkhangel'skii's narratives, Christian, discourse. At the very end of the novel, near the field where the repressed Poles are buried, it is decided that two chapels should be built, one Russian and one Polish, with a garden between them as neutral territory. This is how Aflatuni constructs that 'earthly paradise', where everyone is reconciled or, more precisely, where the hope for universal harmony and forgiveness, which is declared in the title of the novel, is anchored. All this is presented through the eyes of Pliusha, who in her detachment from earthly matters appears increasingly like a nun or a saint.

What is noteworthy, however, is that despite the presence in the novel of a truth-seeker investigating a crime in the past, the idea of repentance or a confession of guilt is hardly articulated in the novel, or rather, it is suppressed by the thesis of reconciliation. In terms of trauma, the point is that the novel depicts not how the victims, the Poles, are trying to get rid of the physiologically painful consequences of trauma, but how their oppressors, the Russians, do so. It is 'traumatic literature', but upside down.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, several very different novels of so-called prize literature about Soviet history have something in common in the way they reutilise the topoi of the Soviet past. Whatever different writing styles their authors adopt, whatever time period they concentrate on, in their portrayals history invariably comes to a certain kind of harmony. The idea of ethical acceptance of the past, even when it comes to mass terror, becomes central to them. The writers construct a system of evaluations such that, ultimately, any experience of the past, including mass terror, is presented as positive.

This is curious, but not entirely new. The ethical normalisation of the social crisis, if we bear in mind the domestic tradition of the present and past centuries, is by no means a recent innovation. A similar situation was observed in the 1920s. Many writers, as well as representatives of other arts, tried to talk about the revolution and civil war, not censoring, but rather explicating its horror. Significant writers of this trend were Isaak Babel', Boris Pil'niak, Artëm Vesëlyi, the aforementioned Andrei Platonov, Vassilii Grossman and Vladimir Zazubrin. An 'objective' narrator proved to be an appropriate device to deal with the recent past under the conditions of the new order. If at first, in the chaos of the 1920s, such a literary strategy for many writers proved to be a wise choice, it clearly did not appeal to Stalin: Stalin demanded a beautiful story, and instead of 'objectivism' socialist realist camouflage and pathos.

Something similar is happening nowadays: the normalisation of history, including the history of mass violence, its evaluation as ethically acceptable, is a proposal with which contemporary writers successfully enter the market of cultural products. This is the economic side of the cultural recycling they are undertaking, but at the same time, of course, it is also an ethical and socio-political choice.

The rhetoric that allows contemporary writers to effect "reconciliation with history" can be summarised as follows. First, it is based on an explicit or implicit appeal to religiosity. In other words, contemporary literature is actively included in the process of

the desecularisation of culture, which once surprised one of the first researchers of recycling in the post-Soviet space, Sonja Luehrmann (2005). Secondly, it is important that despite the dissimilarity of the narratives, in Yakhina's, Arkhangel'skii's and Aflatuni's novels the main character's death turns out to be the key argument for harmonising the past. This recurrent thanatological interest lends itself to various forms of rationalisation – for example, in terms of sociality as the priority of the origin over the individual or in the Christian paradigm, which interprets the earthly life of man as a preparation for the greater and supreme afterlife. But whatever the case, the topicality of death is important to the writers, both as a rhetorical device and as a self-promoted value. Of the authors mentioned above, only Aksenov does not focus on the idea of death in this form in his village prose.

Finally, in some cases (as in Yakhina's horror novel of terror) the idea of forgiveness and harmony is reinforced by the motif of love, and by the motif of sacrifice: the authors sacrifice a concrete person for the love of an abstraction. Thus, one can conclude that the keywords of this new ethical program of so-called prize literature are sacrifice, humility, death and religion.

If we look at these novels discussed above in a larger context, we find that they are by no means unique in their kind. A similar 'poetics of harmony' can also be found in Nikolai Kononov's resolutely anti-Stalinist novel *The Uprising. Documentary novel (Vosstanie. Dokumental'nyi roman, 2016)*, which was shortlisted by the NOS. Somewhat earlier, in 2014, the first *Bol'shaia Kniga* prize was awarded to Zakhar Prilepin for his novel *The Abode (Obitel', 2014)*, where the apologetic rhetoric of concentration camp politics is seen with much greater clarity. Prilepin's *Abode* was, among other prizes, awarded the 2016 Russian Government Cultural Award (Government Order 2017). But even without this, it is clear that the 'harmonisation' of history, which boils down to the elimination of internal conflicts in favour of universal unity, is a state-encouraged line of recycling the past in contemporary Russia. It turns out that a notable number of Russian authors, whose names are prominently mentioned, voluntarily or involuntarily act in accordance with it. Only the need for a thorough and evidentiary parsing of texts stops us from giving other examples of the same kind.

In 2004, Anne Whitehead published her book *Trauma Fiction*. Against the backdrop of countless studies on the aesthetic narrativisation of negative experiences, this work by a representative of the first wave of trauma studies attracts attention given that its title contains the very term that captures the phenomenon. Whitehead drew attention to the paradox presented by works of fiction that address traumatic events: their authors spell out what, according to the essence of the notion of trauma, should seem to resist language and representation. According to Whitehead, the extraordinary authority of trauma studies has only strengthened the desire of contemporary writers to bring the traumatic to the surface. Their appropriation of the ways of conceptualising historical events suggested by trauma studies has resulted in a vast and significant body of fiction (Whitehead 2004: 3), to which Whitehead devotes her research.

If we consider that trauma studies are not only fed by theoretical interest, but are conceived as a kind of social therapy that helps to deal with negative collective experiences, the trauma fiction they provoke must serve the same purpose. The essence of the process to which it thus contributes is not only to make sense of and remedy the effects

of trauma, but also to prevent its recurrence; or at least, the recurrence is accepted by default as highly undesirable.

This is not at all the case with the trend in Russian fiction discussed above, as with Russian cultural production as a whole. Drawing parallels with the USSR of the 1930s-1950s, it could be considered a kind of reincarnation of the then so-called literature of non-conflict. Although fiction of this type deliberately 'visualises' trauma, it does not care about overcoming it. On the contrary, if you continue in the logic of therapy, it promotes a permanent return and adaptation to the traumatic experience, transforming it from an anomaly to the norm. From a political and rhetorical perspective, the latter means a more or less veiled call to maintain the status quo, to freeze both history and modernity. Finally, since this kind of narrativisation does not deny the stressful experience of the past as something ethically unacceptable, but, on the contrary, legitimises its reproduction, the apologetic recycling of the past that it facilitates is more suitable for description in terms of nostalgia studies rather than trauma studies. Based on its predilection for the cultivation of social 'wounds' without any attempt to comprehend and address their causes, it could well be characterised as nostalgia for trauma.

Obviously, the 'harmonisation' of history is not a unique phenomenon and is characteristic not only of the Russian context. Popular mass culture in general tends to transform conflictual subjects, including the discourses of horror, terror, pain and death, into entertainment and pleasure. What should be highlighted however is that Russian cultural production with pretensions to intellectuality – and the prize literature in question often makes a claim to be 'realist', 'serious' and even 'elitist' – is in this respect voluntarily or involuntarily converging with popular culture. The only difference is that it is not aimed at the ordinary mass reader, but at a fairly well-prepared reader who expects obstacles and puzzles from art of various kinds and who is able to enjoy multi-layered allegorical, intertextual, and not just one-dimensional plots. Just as in the case of adventure novels or computer games on a historical theme or, for example, in the case of the reenactment movement, in this new 'literature of non-conflict' the entertainment function begins to supplant the critical function. In this sense, we are confronted with a typical case of the 'gamification' of history. On the other hand, no matter to what degree fiction is entertaining, by virtue of its ethical and rhetorical nature – let us recall Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* again – it always imposes on the audience a certain "fictional world", that is, specific moral values and norms of behaviour.

## Filmography

*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza), dir. Egor Anashkin, Russia 2020.

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