



**Dina Khapaeva**

## History without memory

*Gothic morality in post-Soviet society*

The witches and werewolves of post-Soviet fantasy fiction embody the morality of a society in denial about its criminal past, writes Dina Khapaeva. "Personal loyalty towards superiors and respect for hierarchy constitute gothic society's most important and only uncontested law."

Post-Soviet society is seriously ill with a partial amnesia that makes its historical memory strangely selective. There is no intellectual or political force that would make post-Soviet society face the issue of historical responsibility. The Soviet past is a history without memory.

The fact of selective amnesia is best revealed in a recent survey on Russian mass historical consciousness conducted in July 2007 in three Russian cities — Saint Petersburg, Kazan and Ulyanovsk. Nearly half of the respondents viewed the Soviet regime favourably, with 49 per cent thinking that the Soviet past has had positive effects on post-Soviet culture, and 44 per cent believing the Soviet experience has had a positive impact on contemporary morality. It is thus no surprise that Stalin comes third in a rating of the "most appealing state leaders of the past", while only 23 per cent think his role in Russian history was negative.

Should we imagine that Russians are not informed about their history, that they simply do not know about the Great Terror and the crimes committed during the Soviet period? According to the same 2007 opinion pool, 92 per cent know about the repressions under Stalin, and two thirds have no illusions about the scale of the terror: 63 per cent estimate the number of victims between ten and fifty million. At the same time, 80 per cent think that "Russians have every right to be proud of their history," and 66 per cent agree with the statement that the Russian people bear no responsibility for the crimes committed under the Soviet regime.

In the early 1990s, Russian democrats felt the Soviet system to be compromised not only as a social or political regime. The "demystifications" of glasnost left nothing worth remembering about the Soviet past. In the colloquial Russian of the period, the Soviet era was frequently called a "break" or an "interruption" in the flow of time. Seventy-four years of Soviet power destroyed the historical continuum; Soviet history ceased to be perceived as a time period filled with historical events.

The condemnation of the "crimes of the Stalinists" during the late 1980s and early 1990s turned out to be a short-term political project formed by the political conjuncture and as such had no profound effect on the consciousness

of the masses. It failed to provoke public debates on the relevance of the criminal Soviet past for Russia's future. On the contrary, it spared Russians from any sense of historical guilt and responsibility, and provided the basis for the gradual restoration of the positive image of Soviet history.

### **In shadow of victory: The myth of "The Great Patriotic War"**

Let us now consider the functioning of the Stalinist narrative of WWII, which continues to play a crucial role in preventing reflection about the Soviet past. It should be stressed from the start that the memory of WWII occupies a special place in the historical consciousness of contemporary Russians. According to the opinion poll already cited, 76 per cent of respondents believe the victory in the "Great Patriotic War" to be the most important event in Russian history. Attitudes toward WWII transcend political differences and unite political rivals. Every attempt to contest, criticize or even analyze the actions of the Soviet Army during the war is perceived both by liberals and nationalists as a cynical insult to the memory of those who died in an unprecedented patriotic sacrifice. A proposal to pass a "memorial law" that would prohibit any criticism of the "heroic sacrifice of Soviet soldiers" during WWII, widely discussed by the media in May 2007, is the most recent illustration of the intensity and importance of this memory.

The celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the victory in WWII, in 2005, marked an important stage in the reactivation of the war myth. The official discourse, predominant during the celebrations, reproduced the Stalinist narrative about "our glorious patriotic victory". It could be summarized as follows. On 22 June 1941, the peaceful Soviet Union was cowardly attacked by Nazi Germany. Led by Stalin, the Soviet Army rescued the world, the country, and the Soviet people, defeated the enemy of humanity and rewarded the heroes after victory. Civilians, who were proud to sacrifice their lives for the sake of victory, wholeheartedly supported the Soviet Army in its just, romantic, and heroic struggle. According to a recent opinion poll, 49 per cent think that twenty–seven million dead was a fair price to pay for victory.

Over the past few years, the attempts of the Russian authorities to build a national (and nationalist) consensus based upon this narrative have been thoroughly successful. Indeed, the war myth was constructed to suppress memory of the Gulag, to rename and suppress the memory of the irrational, unjustifiable sufferings of the victims of the Soviet system. The "smelting furnace" of the war myth equated the victims and their murderers in order to unite the society against a common German enemy. The heroic narrative buried the crimes to provide a real foundation for the "new nation, the Soviet people". The most important function of the war myth (which it has successfully fulfilled into the present day) is to assure Russians that the Gulag remains a minor episode in a heroic Soviet history.

Among the very few attempts to break with the official discourse was a special issue of the Russian journal *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas (NZ)*,<sup>1</sup> published jointly with the German journal *Osteuropa*, that focused on Russian and German memories of WWII. While the German contributors reflected on the impact of memory of the war in post–war Germany, their Russian counterparts meditated on the memory of the "victors". In their introduction to the issue, the editors emphasized that the historical significance of WWII could not be analysed outside the context of Stalin's crimes or the nature of the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, the editors had to deal with real and not ideal authors. Consequently, the Holocaust dominates the German half of the issue, while in

the Russian half one can read mostly about Russian prisoners of war, civilian victims, and so on.

The war myth prevents reflection on responsibility for Soviet crimes and hence it is the memory of the horrific, bloody but justifiable patriotic sacrifice that predominates in the texts of the Russian authors. The myth prevents them from asking why the memory of the war in Germany is inseparable from the condemnation of the National Socialism, while continuing to suppress any reflection on the nature of the regime under which the "victorious Soviet people" lived and fought.

The tendency to perceive Stalinism as a normal vector of historical development finds its clear counterpart in contemporary Russian historiography, which in turn influences popular consciousness. According to the respected historian Boris Mironov, Russians need a national history that would "cure" them from a "nationwide inferiority complex" and stop the "groundless humiliation of Russian national feeling". History should help present the Soviet period as a "normal process of modernization" that Russian society underwent at the same time as the "rest of the civilized world". These attempts to provide Russians with a "usable past" remind us of the stance of German historians as Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber, which in the late 1980s ignited the so-called *Historikerstreit*. However, there is no such debate in contemporary Russia. On the contrary, it has become commonplace to celebrate Russia's glorious imperial past under the Tsars and under the Soviets, both among intellectuals and the public at large.

### **Slips of amnesia: Gothic morality**

How can we discover the consequences of historical amnesia? How can we employ customary historical methods to measure the impact of absent memory on contemporary Russian society? What kind of sources could reveal for us this hidden work of deformed memory that results in transformations of values, attitudes, customs and social relations?

Fiction is a particularly fruitful source for studying historical representations of the Stalinist past. As a genre, it addresses moral and aesthetic dilemmas; describes transformations of values, attitudes, customs and social relations; and provides access to the emotions and to the workings of the individual memory of its protagonists. Post-Soviet fiction, loaded with reminiscences of Soviet terror and atrocities, discloses the connection between suppressed memory and the emergence of new moral norms and social structures.

However post-Soviet fiction differs considerably from realistic prose such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or even Grossman's *Life and Fate*. It is overwhelmed by all kind of magic and monsters — vampires, witches and werewolves. I propose<sup>2</sup> to treat post-Soviet fiction as a source for studying the consequences of historical amnesia. The concept of "Gothic aesthetics" aims at examining the socio-psychological mechanisms exercised by suppressed memories.

It should be acknowledged that the proliferation of monsters in fiction, film and computer games is by no means a specifically post-Soviet phenomenon. The omnipresence of monsters in contemporary cultural products signifies a profound challenge to the aesthetic canon. Over the last three centuries, Enlightenment rationality has boxed dragons and witches into a specific genre — fairy tale. Now we see them becoming the main protagonists of novels and films aimed at adults. The human being, that as an inheritance of the

Enlightenment used to be the centre of the anthropocentric universe, has been pushed to the periphery in favour of the non-human. This shift of cultural dominance — from anthropocentric to non-human gothic aesthetics — is what makes the figure of the monster so crucial for our understanding of contemporary culture.

Russian authors have neither invented a new genre nor have they created a new aesthetic canon in which the monsters replace humans. Their intellectual and aesthetic genealogy should be traced to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. However, post-Soviet non-humans are quite different from the hobbits and even the dragons of Tolkien's mythopoeia. Although Tolkien contributed to the invention of gothic aesthetics, he was not responsible for the creation of gothic morality. His post-Soviet heirs took his aesthetic project to its logical end.

The specificity of post-Soviet fantasy as compared to its European or American counterpart consists in the fact that it reflects the transformations of post-Soviet society, in which Gothic aesthetics and Gothic morality have begun to generate specific social practices. Post-Soviet fiction represents with symbolic means contemporary selective amnesia. It reflects how Gothic morality and Gothic society are flourishing as a result of the experience of an unrepented criminal past.

Two highly popular cult novels — Sergei Lukyanenko's *Night Watch* and Vadim Panov's *Taganski Crossroads* — serve as examples. Their success with the Russian reading public is testified by huge print runs and by the fact that they have been turned into movies and computer games. Both novels share features that are typical for the genre in general. Both leave the realities of Russian culture and society almost intact, making them extremely fertile for an analysis of moral and aesthetic developments. Their main protagonists are strikingly similar: rank-and-file administrators, average men on the street, painstakingly portrayed positive heroes with whom the reader fully identifies. In both novels, the plot unfolds in contemporary Moscow.

Nevertheless, the most important similarity is aesthetic: the credo of both authors as well as of their less successful competitors is to reject the world of humans and the idea that mankind is an ultimate value. In post-Soviet fantasy, vampires, werewolves, and witches have replaced men and women. These monsters should not be taken as incarnations of the Nietzschean superman: the secret of their appeal lies in their non-belonging to the disappointing human race. "How great it is that I am not a human!" exclaims a vampire, the central character of *Night Watch*. They are proud to have nothing in common with humble humankind. A vampire modelled after an FSB agent cum cop cum gangster incarnates the aesthetic and moral ideal.

Let us examine the new morality as reflected in post-Soviet fantasy. It should be mentioned at the outset that the most unexpected result of the fall of the Soviet regime was a feeling of moral disorientation. The collapse of communism, whether celebrated or damned, left behind the sense of a moral vacuum, an absence of a coherent system of values to guide moral judgment. The new realities of social life — such as capital, personal enrichment, business relations, bankruptcy and so on — produced new types of human relations that had to be evaluated in moral terms.

To be sure, official Soviet morality was already compromised during the Soviet period. Former Soviet citizens total rejection of anything considered as belonging to the "hypocritical Soviet morality" put an end to the former moral

consensus. However, no coherent system of values emerged as its alternative that was applicable to the new realities of the market economy. As interviews conducted by the author in early 1990s show, the subjects of post-Soviet society felt utterly confused as to how to morally evaluate their new practices. At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church proved completely incapable of providing the basis for a moral consensus in society.

The revolt against "hypocritical Soviet morality" had no impact on attitudes towards Soviet historical mythology. Soviet history supplies the characters and the consumers of post-Soviet fantasy with a positive cultural identity. The "heroic deeds" of the Cheka, the Red Army during WWII or the Bolsheviks during the October Revolution still provide examples of heroism and patriotism worthy of imitation. Writers and readers gaze with admiration at the age of the Terror, national amnesia having left them with no other direction in which to turn.

Dzerzhinsky's<sup>3</sup> motto "Ardent heart, clean hands, cool head" is the only moral maxim that the hero of *Night Watch* recites consistently throughout the novel. The image of the Cheka remains for him an uncontested, romantic ideal. The hero sees no contradiction between his positive attitude towards the Cheka and his conviction that fascism and communism are equally evil, as well as any other collective project. Dzerzhinsky's motto symbolically guides the hero-vampire to a radical denial of mankind's right to exist. "To waste my life serving your cause?" This is the question that a vampire addresses ironically to mankind. Monsters are the true heroes of the national nightmare born out of suppressed memory. It is no surprise that, according to our 2007 opinion poll, Dzerzhinsky occupies the third place in our rating of "appealing Bolshevik leaders".

The nightmare of post-Soviet fiction, which is full of macabre atrocities, consists not only in the triumph of supernatural forces over humans. It is also to be found in the absence of any plausible distinctions between good and evil, which results in the advocacy of narrow-minded selfishness.<sup>4</sup> The main novelty of gothic morality consists in its attitude towards morality itself. Morality is considered something to be avoided, something that can influence the hero's life in the most negative way: "If this guy gave up his selfish wheeling and dealing, his life would certainly become worse. The more morality, the more misfortune", says the vampire-hero of *Night Watch*. True, such an attitude towards morality stems from a radical reconsideration of the place of humans in the general system of values. Morality as such is dismissed as an irrelevant atavism. Indeed, what moral norms *could* be applicable to monsters, to vampires — to non-humans?

Of course, the new attitudes towards morality revealed by the world of fantasy fiction are not reducible to the difference between "fiction" and "reality". A simple mental experiment helps to prove this statement. If we remove the vampires, werewolves and witches from these narratives and substitute them with cops, gangsters and their victims, if we parenthesize the witchcraft and the magic, the story would not differ much from a pale description of everyday Russian life.

At the heart of gothic morality is a remarkable equality of good and evil, expressed in *Night Watch* by the opposition between "light" and "dark" vampires. Their methods and goals are explicitly compared and judged to be the same. Nevertheless, light and dark vampires represent not just a metaphor for the notorious convergence of the state and mafia in Russia. The

impossibility of distinguishing good from evil — the heroes conclude — makes any attempt to do so a sheer absurdity.

The lack of criteria that would allow the heroes to form their own judgments about good and evil is conditioned by the fatal incapacity to answer the question about the nature of evil. Several of Panov's stories are explicitly focused on this question. For example, hordes of monsters appear on Earth at regular intervals. They hunt and devour humans — the hero's beloved, for example. Monsters are far superior to human beings and are inescapable. Nobody knows where they come from and why. The author insists that there can be no explanation, either rational or irrational: humans are just the natural prey of these monsters. The impossibility of explaining the nature of evil, either in ethical or in religious terms, results in the mystical fear conveyed to reader by Panov's *Dikaya Staya* (Wild horde).

The fact that humans can be treated as food for monsters is terrible but inevitable, horrifying and absurd, hints the author. However, neither this fact nor human behaviour under these conditions can be a matter of moral judgment. Morality is not applicable to nonhumans; hence, the behaviour of humans in their interaction with nonhumans cannot be morally biased.

The following testimony, given by the hero at the end of the story, sums up his search for an answer to the question: "What is the difference between good and evil? What is moral justification? What is forgiveness or mercy? I don't know the answer. I can say nothing about my deeds, even to myself. I am using old, irrelevant dogmas and principles, which I have no need for." The acute sense of the inability to find plausible criteria for solving moral dilemmas is the most poignant aspect of the novel, if not of the genre as a whole. The search for moral foundations results in the claim that the only valid criterion for behaviour is personal interest.

The main feature of gothic morality consists neither in a rejection of the old ethical system ("hypocritical Soviet morality"), nor in an embrace of a new ethical system (the "strict but fair" rules of the mafia). Gothic morality is a denial of any abstract system of values that could be considered equally pertinent for all members of a given community. Consequently, moral judgment becomes concrete, situational and totally subjective, a deictic gesture that assigns the predicate "good" or "bad" to this or that concrete practice taking place here and now. Power to make such a "moral judgment" is restricted to the boss — the head of the clan, the mafia godfather, the director of a company or rector of a university. The compromise reached by the different clans is also concrete and situational, and is justified not in terms of universal values but in terms of the personal relations between the heads of the clans.

The total denial of morality leads to a cult of force. Gothic morality considers murder an everyday routine — who counts (dead) humans? "Life against death, love against hate, and force against force, because force is above morality. It's that simple," concludes the hero of *Night Watch*.

Since the hero of post-Soviet fantasy novels — who focuses only on his own personal interests — becomes the supreme instance of judgment, no shared understanding of what is good or bad can arise, even among members of the same clan. Abstract values and norms are replaced by concrete decisions that cannot be generalized. Any kind of altruism, as well as any collective project, is deeply compromised. The only true reality is the struggle for personal

wellbeing.

Personal loyalty to the boss is the only principle that the hero of post-Soviet fantasy never betrays. He is always ready to go against his own judgments, betray his inferiors and the norms of his unit to obey his boss's orders. His inferiors behave in the same way in their relations with him. Personal loyalty to the superior and respect for hierarchy constitute the main and the only uncontested law of gothic society. The more advanced the position of hero becomes in the course of events, the more his loyalty to the boss gives way to his personal power. Only after reaching the highest level in the hierarchy can the hero try to disobey his boss. However, he has no hope of occupying the boss's position, because their innate magical powers are different.

Gothic morality correlates with a deep cultural pessimism, with a disappointment in the values of civilization. "For every president there is a killer, for every prophet there are thousands of adepts to spoil the meaning of his religion and to convert its light into the fire of Inquisition. Every book will be thrown into fire, every symphony will be turned into pop music to be played in pubs, every dirty trick will be justified by a solid philosophical theory," concludes a vampire on the imperfections of human society.

### **The path to gothic society?**

Gothic morality and gothic aesthetics have begun to generate certain social practices that are partly reflected what I would like to call gothic society. Some features of gothic society are frequently referred to as the "new feudalism" (or just "feudalism"), the "corporate society", and the "clan economy". Can these old concepts adequately explain the new conditions?

Let us take, for example, the concept of feudalism. True, several social and economic practices of contemporary society (such as the privatization of state functions, the crisis of public institutions, the unprecedented role of personal relations in the social sphere, etc.) have a number of features in common with medieval society. Metaphorical comparisons of Soviet mores with feudal society were already fairly frequent in Soviet times and still are today. At the same time, the concept of feudalism indicates social and economic conditions that have absolutely nothing to do with contemporary society. These include relations between title and land ownership; the form of peasant dependence typical of rural society; the dominant role of religion; and so on.

The concept of feudalism inevitably evokes the image of a traditional society with a strong hierarchy, based on the nobility, privileges and land ownership. It connotes not only princesses and knights, tournaments and castles, but also a degree of technical backwardness that our contemporaries would find hard to imagine. In other words, the concept of feudalism can only compromise the worrisome diagnosis, unnecessarily violating the common sense that we are not returning to the Middle Ages. The most important similarities between our conditions and certain medieval practices lie not in the particular economic and social order reflected in the concept of feudalism. They reside in the aesthetic and moral transformations that are generated by gothic allusions.

To show that civil society, professionalism and the rule of law are gradually disappearing from the practices of the contemporary state (which we habitually call "democratic"), new concepts have to be invented. "Gothic society" is a concept that attempts to communicate the sense of urgency. Gothic society manifests itself in the evolution undergone by post-Soviet society over the last

ten years. Gothic society represents just one possible — and the least desirable — scenario for Russia. Let us consider some of its elements.

Personal dependence and personal loyalty to the boss have become the main principle of employment, outweighing professional skills, competence and the institutional need to fulfil particular functions. Job descriptions tend to reflect the concrete portrait of a pre-selected candidate. However subjective and idiosyncratic the boss's judgment may be, however based on personal interests and phobias, it is accepted by his subordinates out of personal loyalty. Personal relations with the boss are the main source of personal security, a much more efficient source in a country where the police are notoriously corrupt. These "elementary particles" of society rely for protection not on the constitution or the legal system, but on private armed guards. Those not involved in relations of personal loyalty or family connections find themselves outside gothic society and its privileges.

Administrative positions as well as professions are considered personal family legacies to be transmitted from father to son, while an institution is perceived primarily as a source of personal fortune or a pseudo-feudal estate. Promotion based on personal relations and not on competition makes accident an important rule of gothic society. The process of political decision-making is limited to personal compromises among the bosses: university rectors, directors of enterprises, directors of oil companies, and so on.

Gothic society does not simply generate a social alternative to democracy: it profits from every loss of democracy. Gothic society has no respect for individuality or privacy, and openly contradicts the idea of human rights. Such social organization leaves no room for public politics and leads to the closing of the public sphere. It is no coincidence that, according to our opinion poll in 2007, 91 per cent and 84 per cent of respondents respectively think that the most important means for achieving a high social position or acquiring considerable personal fortune are social connections. A poll by the Levada Centre, meanwhile, shows that 75 per cent feel a deep mistrust for the police and more than 80 per cent believe that the police in their own city are corrupt.

The most important feature of gothic society is the way the *zona*, the particular form of Soviet camp, is converted into a founding principle of post-Soviet society. Since the inception of the Gulag, the Bolshevik policy was to mix criminals with political prisoners. Criminals were considered by the Soviet regime "socially proximal" and were allowed to impose criminal norms on the rest of the prisoners, thus helping the wardens to run the Gulag.

The *zona* permeates various aspects of social life and relations in Russia; its legacy is not limited to the post-Soviet prison and army. Aside from its most notorious and obvious manifestations — such as camp slang's transmogrification into the language of power and literature, the convergence of mafia and state; or the unbelievable degree of corruption — the rules of the *zona* are reproduced in the principles of social organization. The total absence of resistance to camp culture, the incapacity, due to the long tradition of their contamination under the Soviet regime, to distinguish clearly between the *zona* and "normal life", and the unwillingness to reflect on the history of the concentration camp make today's Russia especially vulnerable to a gothic path of development.

Neprikosnovennyj zapas 40–41 (2–3/2005), see contents and summary in Eurozine: <http://www.eurozine.com/journals/nz/issue/2005-05-03.html>; Osteuropa 4–6/2005, see contents and summary in Eurozine: <http://www.eurozine.com/journals/osteuropa/issue/2005-04-26.html>

- <sup>2</sup> See also: Dina Khapaeva, *Gothic Society. Morphology of a Nightmare*, Moscow: New Literary Review 2007/ 2008 (in Russian)
- <sup>3</sup> Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the NKVD (Cheka) — ed.
- <sup>4</sup> Another recent example of a positive representation of the Cheka is *Bro's Wanderings* by Vladimir Sorokin, a cult author of post-Soviet fantasy. The action of the novel takes place in post-revolutionary Russia, where Cheka officers are the protagonist's "brothers", supporting him in his mission to destroy mankind and human civilization.

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Published 2009-02-02

Original in English

Contribution by Merkur

First published in Merkur 11/2008 (German version)

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