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VICTIM BALLS IN POST-STALIN RUSSIA: DISTANCE, GENERATIONS, MOURNING

After the French Revolution, relatives of the guillotined victims used to gather regularly for Bals des victimes, or Victims' Balls. These legendary balls provide a prototypical case of what I call mimetic mourning — a recurrent response to loss that entails a symbolic re-enactment of that loss. Referring to Russian cultural developments from Khrushchev's Thaw to Putin's revivalism, I will situate the fundamental concepts of cultural memory, such as loss, trauma, and mourning, in the context of changing generations. Structured by generations (which are memory concepts themselves), temporal distance from the social catastrophe changes the substance and forms of cultural mourning. The historical processes of catastrophic scale traumatize the first generation of descendants, while their daughters and sons – the grandchildren of the victims, perpetrators and onlookers – produce the work of mourning for their grandparents: mass graves for the generation of terror, trauma for the first post-catastrophic generation, and mourning for the second. I will also compare the post-catastrophic memories of mass violence with the postcolonial memories of oppression and emancipation. In some cases, these two experiences overlap, which is a particular challenge to the theoretical framework.

For many years, Nadezhda Mandelstam had a painful, persistent nightmare: she is standing in line to buy food and her husband, Osip, is standing behind her; but when she looks back, he is not there. Not recognizing her or not willing to talk to her, he walks away. She runs after him to ask, "What are 'they' doing to you?" (Mandelstam 1999, 433). But he never responds. Importantly, Mandelstam put the word "they" in quotation marks, as if she saw these quotation marks in her dream; though she had no way of conceptualizing "those" who had taken away her husband, she needed a grammatical fiction or place-holder, which remained unspecified but which, with an element of self-irony, she put into quotation marks.

It is not the pain of knowing, but rather the desire to know – "What are 'they' doing to you?" — that lies at the heart of mourning. This desire to know the unbearable is also a desire to share its burden, to express it in clear words or images, to tell the story – what "they" have done to him – to the close community of equals, and then to others as

well. At this stage, Victims' Balls become textual; in other words, communicative memory about the terrible past flows into cultural memory, where it stays indefinitely.[1] With a somewhat similar meaning, Walter Benjamin said that "memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging" (Benjamin 1979, 314). Two barely compatible metaphors – theater and digging – reveal the problem of mourning. A man who digs into his own past is also a performer who plays his role in public. Whether he performs digging in the soil, in the archive, or in popular culture, this is a practical activity, the work of mourning. But this work does not end once the past has simply been dug up and revealed. Only when they become public, as in a theater, do these excavations of the past, buried and unburied, complete the work of mourning.

In contrast to the Nazi terror that featured a crystal-clear boundary between the victims and perpetrators, the Soviet terror targeted many ethnic, professional, and territorial groups. Though in some waves of terror the Poles, the Ukrainians, the Chechens, or the Jews suffered more than others, there were other waves when the terror chose Russians. Some of these operations focused on the peasants and others targeted the intelligentsia, but some periods extracted a particularly heavy toll from the state and party apparatus. It was a rule rather than an exception that the perpetrators of one wave of terror became victims of the next, with a lag that was measured in months or years. Though in every singular act of torture or murder, the victim and the executioner were separated by an enormous distance, the fact was that a little later, in several months or years, the executioner would likely become a victim of the same treatment. The victims did not know that they would be avenged by the same system that murdered them. This rotation makes it very difficult to reach any historical, philosophical, or theological – in fact, any rational – understanding of these events. Nikolai Shivarov, an investigator who forced Osip Mandelstam, and several other poets and writers, to acknowledge their "criminal" enmity towards the Soviet system, committed suicide as a convict of the gulag in 1940 (Nerler 2010, 29). After hundreds of thousands perished on the construction site of the Belomor Canal, the head of this construction project, Semen Firin, was sentenced and shot in 1937. After millions died in the gulag, its organizer and chief administrator, Matvei Berman, was sentenced and shot in 1939. Thousands of perpetrators were purged, arrested, tortured, and executed in the waves of repressions that decimated the bureaucratic bodies responsible for repressions, the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) and related bodies of the Communist Party, in Moscow and the provinces. Victims and perpetrators were mixed together in the same families, ethnic groups, and lines of descent. Sometimes they also found themselves mixed together in the same cells and barracks. Unlike their

[1] For the distinction between communicative and cultural memory: Assmann 1996, 123-134 and 2008, 49-72.

peers in the colonial domains of the socialist empire such as Ukraine or the Baltic states, who felt oppressed by a foreign power and were eager to resist it, and unlike even the peasants in Russian villages who perceived collectivization as the ruthless imposition of an urban and therefore foreign order, the victims from the Russian intelligentsia perceived the terror as senseless and monstrous precisely because it was self-inflicted. Indeed, at the Moscow trial of 1992 that failed to ban the Communist Party as a criminal organization, its attorneys produced a bizarre argument: since communists suffered from "repressions" more than others, their organization could not be blamed for these crimes, even though it had organized them. Since their peers have already punished some perpetrators, this argument goes, there is no need to punish these people again.

In the stories of Victims' Balls, participants come together physically in a ritual of collective mourning, a behavior that we often observe among survivors of a catastrophe and the first generation of their descendants. Later generations continue to mourn and share, but they do not feel this need to bond and dance with their peers. As time passes and generations replace one another, their mournful, mimetic performances migrate to the increasingly virtual spaces of theater, art, literature and then, to film, TV-shows, and social media. Academic historiography also plays its role in this broad process. While Europeans are talking about the "mnemonic age," a "memory fest," and a growing obsession with the past "around the globe," some Russian authors complain about the "historical amnesia" in their country. Unlike the treatment of former Nazi officials in Germany, no professional ban was ever instated for former leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, let alone its rank-and-file members. Only negligible compensation has been provided to those victims who have been officially "rehabilitated". Many more of those who were robbed by the Soviet communists, such as the millions of collective farmers whose fates differed little from that of those who were sent to the gulag, for example, will never see any form of compensation whatsoever. This unfinished business is one of the reasons for the obsessive return of history in contemporary Russian culture and politics.

From Pushkin's major works *Boris Godunov* (1825) and *Eugene Onegin* (1833), both of which analyze remorse for an unjustifiable murder, to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and then to Aleksandr Blok's *Retribution* (1919), the classics of Russian literature provide spectacular templates for mourning, shame, and repentance. Rediscovering these classical examples after a long period of revolutionary enthusiasm, the late Soviet culture produced its own ways of coming to terms with the horrible past. Three cultural genres led the Soviet mourning: literature, music, and film. In literature, mimetic mourning and political protest melded in such works as Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (published in the West in 1957 and in Russia in 1988), Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (1963, 1987), the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam (1970-72, 1999), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973, 1989), Varlam Shalamov *Kolyma Tales* (1978, 1987), and Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (1980,

1988). Another leading genre was music, a traditional medium of mourning which had the additional advantage of being impenetrable for the censors. Dmitry Shostakovich composed a series of major works that mourned the victims of the Soviet period, from his Seventh "Leningrad" symphony (1942) to his late works (1962-72) that combined music with political poetry. I have argued that a number of major Soviet films belong to the same pantheon of mourning.

If the Nazi Holocaust exterminated the Other, the Soviet terror was suicidal. The self-inflicted nature of the Soviet terror has complicated the circulation of three energies that structure the post-catastrophic world: a cognitive striving to learn about the catastrophe; an emotional desire to mourn for its victims; and an active drive to find justice and take revenge on the perpetrators. As in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, these three impulses – to learn, to mourn, and to avenge, – compete for the limited resources of the melancholic mind. The suicidal nature of the Soviet atrocities made revenge all but impossible, and even learning very difficult. To learn about oneself is the toughest among the challenges of learning. Mourning, however – the third of our three post-catastrophic energies – has had no limits.

There was no external authority, such as occupying forces or an international court, to dispense justice; and there has been no serious philosophical debate in Russia, secular or religious, over problems of collective guilt, memory and identity. Despite an attempt made in the early 1990s to initiate such a debate by the historian and gulag survivor Dmitry Likhachev, Russian intellectuals have not produced anything comparable to the great book by Karl Jaspers, *The Problem of Guilt* (Jaspers 1965). In Germany or France, denial of the Holocaust is a crime, but in Russia a politician or professor can disseminate propaganda for the Soviet past and ignore or deny its crimes without subjecting him- or herself to the slightest risk. Nostalgia has become a fashionable word and an important element of post-Soviet culture (Boym 2001). Allusions to the past make up an important part of the political present. Political opponents in Russia differ most dramatically not in their understanding of economic reforms or international relations, but in their interpretations of history. Discussions of current policy issues rarely go without reference to historical experience. Concepts and labels like "Stalinism", "the cult of personality", "political repressions" are rhetorically employed as often as modern legal or economic terms. The events of the mid-twentieth century still make up a living, contentious experience that threatens to return again and therefore, feels frightening and uncanny. Post-Soviet memory operates as a living combination of various symbols, periods, and judgments, which are experienced simultaneously. The present is oversaturated with the past, and this solution refuses to produce any sediment. As Tony Judt put it, in Western Europe, the problem is a shortage of memory, but in Eastern Europe and Russia, "there is too much memory, too many pasts on which people can draw" (Judt 1999, 299; Esbenshade 1995, 72-96).

Too much or too little, one thing is clear: it is the very nature of the Soviet terror that makes it difficult to comprehend, remember, and memorialize. To the scholars of

Stalinism, there is nothing more foreign than the German-Jewish idea of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and the reason for this is not only the desire to receive the proper recognition for the victims of Stalinism on a par with the victims of Nazism, but also the intuitive understanding of the multitude of genocides and democides that constitute Stalinism (Rabinbach 2005, 397-420; Sznaider 2011).[2] There were many waves of "repressions", and most of them were repetitive, chaotic, confusing, and overwhelming. Even though their total numbers can be set forth in the homogenous statistical language of demographic losses, in other respects they defy standardization, spread out as they were over a good part of the twentieth century and across the gigantic and endlessly diverse space of Eurasia. The descendants of these repressions' survivors do not share the concepts that were crucial for the perpetrators and fatal for the victims. The "kulaks", the "saboteurs", the "bourgeoisie", the "social parasites", "anti-Soviet elements" and other "class enemies" were exterminated for belonging to these categories, which have no meaning for us. Remembering the Soviet terror often entails disbelief that such things could have happened. This is a productive feeling, but the least appropriate response to it would be a redemptive narrative that demonstrates the functionality of terror.[3] The victims' suffering and the perpetrators' intentions are both unbelievable in man-made catastrophes, and "suspension of disbelief", a popular literary convention, cannot help us to learn their lessons. The Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander writes about disbelief as a deep and common response to the Nazi terror. He states that though a common goal of historical writing is "to domesticate disbelief, to explain it away", the research on the Holocaust should resist this temptation (Freidlander 2007, xxvi). Scholars of the Soviet period should aspire to do the same. Writing history does not imply resolving its warped contradictions in a smooth, functional narrative. Making sense of the memory of the past does not require sharing its weird presumptions. We do not need to comprehend the murderer's motives in order to mourn his victim, though many mourners do know the desire to understand what happened, and why, and what it meant.

At the end of the twentieth century, many influential thinkers, particularly in the field of economics, connected socialist ideas with Stalinism and claimed that striving for full equality and universal justice logically leads to state-sponsored terror. Yet we also know ample historical instances of terror committed for the sake of private property, both in colonial and domestic contexts. Whether socialism inescapably led to Stalinism or whether the latter was a result of unique and unfortunate choices and circumstances, there is no doubt that the Soviet regime compromised the ideas of socialism gravely, and maybe even irreversibly. As a result, mourning for the human victims of the Soviet

[2] For a survey of the Soviet genocides see Naimark 2010; for the concept and statistics of democide see Rummel 1992 and 1996.

[3] For criticism of redemptive narratives of the Holocaust, see Lawrence 1991 and LaCapra 2001.

experiment co-exists with mourning for the ideas and ideals that were also buried by this experiment. This is double mourning, for the people who were murdered for the sake of ideas, and for these ideas, which were also killed by this violence: a warped concept in itself.

I rely on the concept of mourning more than on other concepts that have been tested in this field, most notably trauma.[4] As Sigmund Freud classically defined it, mourning is an active, realistic, and healthy process. It has its limits, both in time and in intensity. It has its interminable counterpart, melancholia, though of course there is much uncertainty about the boundary between them. Freud was a great mourner in his late years, and the concept of mourning was at the center of his thinking, close to but different from the concept of trauma. Trauma is a response to a condition that had been experienced by the self; mourning is a response to a condition of the other. An individual subject who has suffered a trauma, such as shell shock, cannot represent the traumatic situation; this representational inability is precisely what constitutes trauma.[5] In contrast, mourning is all about representation. Nadezhda Mandelstam knew exactly whom she lost, when she saw him for the last time, and what the circumstances of the loss were. There is no such knowledge in trauma.

Re-membering its losses, a post-catastrophic culture lives on through the subsequent generations, as the survivors who struggle with their traumas give way to the descendants who mourn the victims of the catastrophe. We mourn for our grandparents whether we remember them or not, and we mourn for the victims of the Soviet or French revolutions whom we do not remember. For reasons that are demographic rather than psychological, it is easier to understand Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" as a domain of mourning rather than a domain of trauma or the post-traumatic (Hirsch 2008, 103-128; Hirsch 2012). The alternative idea, that trauma with its subtle psychological dynamic can be passed down through generations is conceptually more complex and empirically less verifiable.

Different in their relations to representation, the two conditions, mourning and trauma, are similar in relation to repetition. In mourning as well as in trauma, the subject obsessively returns to certain experiences of the past, and these returns obstruct this subject's ability to live in the present. Sometimes – in those cases when, as Freud put it, the subject loses her ability "to love and work" – this obsession with the past is clearly pathological, but sometimes it is temporary and reversible. After World War I and the revolutions that ended it, Sigmund Freud formulated his newest discovery, the "compulsion to repeat". Easily explained by the pleasure principle when the repetition involved pleasurable gratification, it became a puzzle when, as Freud observed, the

[4] I benefitted a great deal from reading, among other studies on mourning, Winter 2005, Homans 2000, Leader 2008 and Butler 2004.

[5] See Felman and Laub 1992, Caruth 1996, Lambek and Antze 1996, Leys 2000, Kaplan 2005, Ball 2007, Lays 2009.

subject and the process of repetition were both excruciating. It is not only that wounding experiences of the past turned into painful memories in the present. Freud discovered more than this: the past's uncanny ability to contaminate the present. To account for this anachronistic phenomenon, Freud revised his whole system, looking far beyond the pleasure principle. The new dichotomy that he devised juxtaposed remembering, which relates to the past as past, and repeating, which re-enacts the past in the present.

As Freud notes, his patients tended "to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past". The physician would prefer to see remembering, but like his distant colleagues, historians, he often sees repetitions. In remembrance, the past and the present are distinct; in repetition, they are fused, so that the past prevents the subject from seeing the present. The therapist's duty is to short-circuit these cyclical reverberations of the past by helping the patient "to re-experience some portion of her forgotten life" so that it might be remembered rather than re-enacted. "The ratio between what is remembered and what is reproduced varies from case to case", but the patient needs "to recognize that what happens to be reality is in fact only a reflection of the forgotten past". Commenting on this idea, anthropologist Michael Taussig postulates a "double action": the subject both re-experiences her past and distances herself from it, she is both in and out of this past, and it is at that point that she realizes that what she is confronting "is not the past but a memory" (Freud 1975, 18-20 and Taussig 2006, 63).[6]

In his introduction to the German translation of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Freud gives a challenging example of the mimetic nature of mourning. Interpreting Dostoevsky's epileptic seizures, Freud declares: "We know the meaning and intention of such death-like attacks. They signify an identification with the dead person, either with someone who is really dead or with someone who is still alive and whom the subject wishes dead" (Freud 1990, 447).[7] Though mourning usually strives to revivify the past, it can also be anticipatory: the subject imagines or rehearses a future horror, something that he fears could happen, or something that he fears he will bring to pass through his own guilty desires. In this remarkable construction, Freud allows for

[6] See also Dufresne 2000 and Davis 2007.

[7] Here and elsewhere, I am using the idea of mimesis in the broad Aristotelian sense specified by two French theorists, René Girard and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. For a genealogy of the concept that leads to Girard, see Gebauer and Wulf 1995. For my reading of Girard, see Etkind 2011, chap. 12. Borch-Jacobsen has shown that the idea of mimesis structured many of Freud's texts, even if Freud never acknowledged it. According to Borch-Jacobsen, mimesis is rooted in Freud's intuition of sympathy or identification with other people. This is probably a reason why Freud did not feel the need to explain mourning, which figures in some of his texts as a primary motivation (Borch-Jacobsen 1993). On mimesis and anti-mimesis as conceptual dimensions in trauma theory see Leys 2000.

the possibility of re-directing the mechanisms of mourning towards other purposes, such as revenge, rebellion, or forewarning.

What we usually fear is the uncertainty of the future, but we often imagine this future as a repetition of the past. Only an "impulsion to remember", writes Freud, can overcome the "compulsion to repeat", but the forces of resistance work against this process: "The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (Freud 2001, 151). The dichotomy between repeating and remembering is central for Freud's "technique", but culture blurs these processes. On the stage of post-catastrophic memory, the dialectics of repetition and remembering produce warped imagery, which combines the analytic, self-conscious exploration of the past with its reverberations and transfigurations. Spirits, ghosts, demons, and other creatures conflate re-enactments with remembrances in creative forms that can be naïve or sophisticated, regressive or productive, influential or isolated.

Psychoanalytic studies of post-traumatic syndromes in Germany suggest that traumatic experience is transmitted transgenerationally. The second, and even third, generations following a social catastrophe manifest "subnormal" psychological health and social performance, and this is claimed to be true both for the descendants of the victims and the descendants of the perpetrators.[8] If the loss is not recognized, it is repressed; when repressed, it turns into new and strange forms; henceforth, it threatens to return as the uncanny. Following the classic study of "phantoms" which was based on deciphering a secret language of Freud's Russian patient, Sergei Pankeev, some scholars believe that similarly subtle, mysterious mechanisms govern the transmission of transgenerational memory.[9] I believe that before formulating such complex hypotheses, we need to look at what culture, high and low, presents in the plain view. In the modern world, novels, films, school textbooks, museums, monuments, guided tours and finally, historical studies present rich narratives about the past, and transmit these narratives from generation to generation.[10]

In Russia, a land where millions remain unburied, the repressed return as the undead. They do so in novels, films, and other forms of culture that reflect, shape, and possess people's memory. The ghostly visions of Russian writers and filmmakers extend the work of mourning into those spaces that defeat more rational ways of understanding the past. Embracing the confusion of present and past, the obsessive re-enactment of the loss, and the disturbed and disjointed nature of the relationship to the present, the melancholic dialectic of re-enactment and defamiliarization produces a rich but puzzling imagery.

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[8] See Volkan, Ast and Greer 2002; Schwab 2010.

[9] See Abraham and Torok 1986 and 1994. For criticism, see Davis 2005, 373-79.

[10] For a psychological approach which emphasizes intergenerational negotiations and the agency of the younger generation, see Tschuggnall and Welzer 2002, 130-45; and Markowitsch and Welzer 2010.

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