

BOOK REVIEW

The Russia that We Have Lost: Pre-Soviet Past as Anti-Soviet Discourse, by Pavel Khazanov, University of Wisconsin Press, 2023, \$89.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780299345105.

Drawing on a dozen or so movies, novels, and philosophical tracts, Pavel Khazanov convincingly diagnoses the driving force of post-Soviet Russian political culture. Revulsion at the Stalinist system is combined with a recognition that the society that exists today is the product of that very system—the educated middle class in particular.

One of the most important cultural products of the perestroika era were two films by Stanislav Govorukhin: *Can't Live Like This (Tak zhit' nelzia)* (1990) and *The Russia We Have Lost (Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali)* (1992). They were a shocking indictment of the Russian society that 75 years of communism had produced, from a nationalist perspective. The films were largely ignored by Western academia: social scientists had too many dramatic political events to deal with, and the literary community probably did not see much artistic merit in Govorukhin's work.

But here we are 30 years later, and Pavel Khazanov has finally given Govorukhin the attention he deserves. Govorukhin's films are a vital reference point in understanding the ideological core of Putinism. Govorukhin reminds us that the broken, crime-ridden society of the 1990s was not the product of “shock therapy”: the idea of Russian society rooted in a “eugenically degraded narod” was already well in place before the arrival of neoliberal reforms (108).

One response to that unpleasant reality is to invoke the culture of pre-1917 Russia through reverence for the literary canon and the values of the aristocracy. The liberal intelligentsia as a class were suspect because they led to terrorism and 1917; so instead what is valued is the humanity of the individual. The favored intellectuals are the doomed Decembrists of 1825 and not the Bolsheviks. The year 1917 was a tragedy that robbed Russia of its true historical future (8).

This imperial retro framing carries with it a message of political powerlessness. The Subject that is being imagined through these literary works—which Khazanov cleverly explains as the “we” that has lost Russia—is a spectator to historical events, absolved of responsibility for the course of history—a “conservative suspension of agency” (13).

This did not of course begin with Govorukhin. The Stalinist elite used Socialist Realist mass culture to sell the lie of postclass utopia to the masses and unleashed terror to eliminate the intelligentsia that could claim elite status. But then in the Thaw of the 1950s we saw the emergence of a politically disempowered humanism focused on the “lost” Russia of the 19th century (as in Anna Akhmatova's “Word on Pushkin”), with what Khazanov calls a neo-Decembrist intellectual elite emerging in Brezhnev's times. This approach can be found in both liberals and conservatives, dissidents and coopted intellectuals. They have a shared faith in their own elite status as bearers of culture and continuity, in contrast to the wild, uncultured masses on one side (that produced little of its own beyond the “criminal camp songs”) and the heartless, despotic state on the other. Both liberals and conservatives have a shared fear of revolution. The educated elite of Soviet times are projected back into the “Russia we have lost,” rendering the Soviet project an unfortunate historical detour.

Khazanov explores these themes through a variety of sources: novels, essays, movies, and TV series. Chapter 2 discusses the movie *Before History's Judgment* (1965), featuring Vasily Shulgin (sometimes referred to as the “grandfather” of Russian nationalism), and *Operation Trust* (1967), a TV series about a monarchist turned Cheka agent Aleksander Yakushev. The latter helps understand the appeal of the well-known Max von Stierlitz in the TV series *17 Moments of Spring* (1973): a Chekist who passes himself off as a German aristocrat. That show is widely recognized as the most

formative influence on Putin's world view. Chapter 3 explores neo-Decembrism in the work of four intellectuals of the late 1960s (Aleksandr Galich, Yurii Lotman, Natan Eidelman, and Bulat Okudzhava).

The films of Nikita Mikhalkov are central to Khazanov's case. Mikhalkov created a powerful and appealing image of an imperial past that is rich in melodrama and humanity but devoid of political agency. *Unfinished Piece for the Piano Player* (1977) ends with the words of Anna Petrovna, "Everything will be as before" (73). It is telling that Mikhalkov's Chekhovian imperial estate has some of the attributes of Soviet dachas and communal housing. Regarding Mikhalkov's movie *Oblomov* (1979), Yurii Loshchitz argued that Oblomov "looks past history's grudges [and] achieves a position of virtuous inaction vis-à-vis its grand narratives" (83). In contrast to the modernizer Stolz, Oblomov represents a Christ-like kenosis, a "moral community of shared suffering" (89).

Petr Stolypin, the conservative reformer prime minister assassinated in 1911, has been promoted by the Putin elite as the main political symbol of the path not taken (chap. 5). Stolypin was a central figure in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*. Nationalist Sviatoslav Rybas published a biography of Stolypin in 1991, reissued in 2003, with updates on the importance of rigging elections (114). By 2008, polls showed Stolypin placing in the top five of greatest Russians (97). A Stolypin monument was erected in 2012, followed by a Stolypin Club and Stolypin Institute.

Stolypin represents the competent manager (*khoziaistvennik*) and defender of the state (*gosudarstvennik*), a builder as opposed to a wrecker. These are categories central to Putin's state. The *khoziaistvenniki* are represented by Moscow's Major Yurii Luzhkov, one of the most powerful figures of the 1990s, who did much to create an imperial retro rebuilding of the capital (and who was an early advocate, it should be noted, of the annexation of Crimea).


Chapter 6 returns to Mikhalkov, with his movie version of Boris Akunin's *State Counsellor* (2005). Mikhalkov changes the ending: the hero is obliged to serve the state, corrupt and incompetent though it is (121). Khazanov also explores Liudmila Ulitskaya's story *Queen of Spades* (2004), Viktor Pelevin's novel *Chapaev* (1996), Leonid Parfenov's *Nation in Bloom* documentary about Sergei Prokudin-Gorski (2013), and Aleksander Sokurov's movie *Russian Ark* (2002).

Khazanov takes us beyond the standard linear narrative of an all-powerful Soviet state → collapse → chaos. By elucidating the complexities of Soviet society and the ambiguous role of the educated middle class, he shows the deep continuities in Russian society that persist across the decades and across successive regimes.

There is an intense and polarized debate raging over the responsibility of Russian culture for the sins of Putinism. This book will be an important contribution to that debate. Khazanov argues that both liberal and conservative intellectuals had authoritarian impulses, going back to the Thaw period.

The book is based on Pavel Khazanov's 2017 dissertation and appears to have been written before February 24, 2022, with a few brief updates referring to the full invasion of Ukraine. Even though this was a pre-February 2022 research project, its relevance and importance are hugely amplified by the invasion. Reading the manuscript in the wake of the June 2023 Prigozhin mutiny, the opening quote of "any poor order in Russia is better than its destruction" resonates even more powerfully.

The book is suitable for assignment in both graduate and advanced undergraduate Russian studies courses.

Peter Rutland 
 Wesleyan University
prutland@wesleyan.edu
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