In the last autumn of the USSR, the fall of 1991, six years of social upheaval had reached a point of professed exhaustion. The failed coup or putsch of the preceding August had turned legislative favor for the first time decisively and dramatically in the direction of reformists, and across the country people were confronted even more profoundly with uncertainty in all arenas. Against this backdrop, an acrimonious schism in the notorious Union of Writers of the USSR galvanized the Russian intelligentsia. As leading bards brought into the service of the state ideology, members of the elite union had been the main architects of Soviet culture since their profession had been collectivized under Stalin in 1934. They had long held claim to an almost priestly status in the USSR, and it was consistent with this directive role that the sundering of the union—a split between an old guard eager to preserve the existing hierarchy of power and a new establishment seeking to reduce the union’s coercive influence—was widely held to be a metaphor for the crumbling Soviet state.

What I present here are a series of six conversations with Russian writers, editors, and literary critics. From their various positions in the union melee, they speak not only to the extraordinary degree of social engineering that went into the production of Soviet culture, but they offer a sense of the complex spectrum of political agendas that compete today in the wake of the Soviet Union’s demise. Their reflections document a specific historic moment for Russian society, but they also evince a sense of the chaos produced when the collective past changes almost more rapidly than the present itself.

In 1986, less turbulent times, the Union of Writers of the USSR counted almost ten thousand members in its ranks. In keeping with the hegemony of the Russian voice throughout the Soviet system, five thousand of those members were from the Russian republic and two thousand were from Moscow alone. The union’s wealth and influence were legion. It administered all the major literary journals and periodicals around the country, countless printing presses, its own massive housing fund, resorts, guest homes, and access to
goods in otherwise chronic short supply. To be inducted into the union was a coveted privilege, determined in principle by the quality and quantity of a writer's publications, but more often achieved through private connections or blat. Hence, as one of its members notes here below, "It's unlikely that there has ever been another writer's union so filled with businessmen, bureaucrats, carpenters and psychics." Although the task of the union was to organize the Soviet enlightenment and exercise ideological homogeneity, it has never been an entirely homogenous body.

I sought out each of the figures here for their reputations as politically engaged social critics. Few are of national prominence, but each are well known within their respective Moscow and Petersburg circles. Indeed, knowing that the conversations would be used in a montage of perspectives, many referenced to the others' work a number of times over. The conversations were held separately over the course of November 1991. In each instance, the questions were largely the same: What had brought about the split in the writers' union? To what extent did this reflect the broader politics of Soviet culture? Is it possible to renovate a disgraced past without jettisoning it altogether? At a time when madmen were becoming ministers and the august were being revealed as grotesque, words themselves were losing currency and vectors of meaning were reversed routinely. Characteristic here are stunning reversals in the ideas of nationalism, pluralism, dissidence, patriotism, Marxism, and bolshevism. Context becomes critically important in determining whether these are invoked favorably, dispassionately, or as defamations of the most incendiary order. If the reader notes that the speakers contradict each other and themselves in a number of places, then they will come closer to the urgency and ambivalence that reigned in Russia then as it does now.

An unexpected turn in the cultural and political debates since this schism took place has been the reanimation of what has long been a much-contested opposition in Russian culture between Slavic and Western camps. In the nineteenth century, the debate was personified by writers such as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy who played upon a geographic and historic setting that pitched Russia between two polar constructs: an Asia portrayed as mystical, meditative, and crude, and a West portrayed as cosmopolitan and ruthlessly self-serving. In more recent years it has been characterized by the difference between Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov. Since the fall of the empire, the contrast has become a favored tool for Russian nationalists of every stripe. Here the debate is over more than just an aesthetic of authenticity; it lies at the heart of a score of continuing contestation over political and ideological hegemony. These are very Soviet dirges which break away from the conventional sense of the tragic. Rather than meeting misfortune by turning inward as the early Greeks would have, they provoke and challenge; they demand an audience. Rather than dwelling on heroes of mythic, romantic proportions, these professions of lament give us protagonists from a very real world, morally compromised by their pasts and haunted by uncertainty. They also offer us insight into what are arguably the most compelling voices in the current reformulation of the Russian identity, not the voices of the reformists or the communists, but those of the vast majority of Russians who find themselves in between—the people who have almost managed to reconstruct themselves with the changing times, but who are profoundly ill at ease with the implications of the reforms that they hesitantly had acknowledged as necessary.

From the ruins of the present, the interviews speak to a radical reevaluation of the past, leading in turn to new definitions of self based on assertions of blamelessness or complicity. In the course of the discussions, all insist that the old guard is still in power, but who the old guard is depends on who you are talking to.

Galina Andreevna Belaia, professor and literary critic, became well known in Moscow literary circles in the 1960s and 1970s for lecturing to overflow audiences on the works of forbidden writers. For many years she worked at the prestigious Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow, and has recently left to organize the new Russian University for the Humanities. We met in her apartment in Moscow off Bezbozny Pereulok [Godless lane].

Grant: I heard of you initially through your defense of Pasternak at the Institute of World Literature, particularly against Dmitri Urnov, who runs the journal Voprosy literatury [Problems of literature].

Belaia: Urnov is in America now, giving lectures or something. On the first day of the putsch he gave an interview on American television where he welcomed the coup.

Grant: Strangely enough.

Belaia: There was nothing strange about it to us. The man is a fascist.

Grant: I met him last year and he remained in my memory as one of those people who managed to reconstruct themselves more swiftly than others. He described himself repeatedly as a dissident . . .

Belaia: Urnov?

Grant: He was quite insistent about it.

Belaia: Urnov? That doesn't have the slightest bearing on reality. On the contrary, he was always clearly in the furthest of right-wing camps along with Kozhinov, Palievskii, the Pamiat' people, the Slavophiles. The man
has the mentality of a jockey, someone who beats the horse harder and
harder in order to get what he wants. He is highly educated, a specialist in
foreign literature, and yet he made his career on the party, on the cultivation
of “party-mindedness” (partyiost) in literature. And I might add quite a
considerable career. His entire work has been devoted to party-mindedness,
party-mindedness. Now, thank God, the party has been banned—what prostitu­tion it was. The party was his whip and he got quite far with it. Recently
he struck again when he decided to write a preface to a book we were pre-
paring, a collection of articles by the exiled writer Andrei Siniavskii. The
preface was vile, raising questions about whether Siniavskii really went to
the labor camps or not—he didn’t believe that Siniavskii could manage to
write about Pushkin while in prison; then he maligned Siniavskii for having
rejected Pasternak—that’s a joke since Urnov himself can’t stand Pasternak.
It was just ghastly. He’s a horrible person, and today he stands at the head of
_Neprogy literature_ because his group has yet to truly fall from power.

**Grant:** What does that say about what is going on in the country as a
whole? Everywhere you have battles going on between liberals and conserva-
tives, reformists and the old guard, but the conservatives use _perestroika_
labels, the liberals turn out to be equally interested in the spoils of power.
Most of the time, the result is bedlam.

**Belalai:** The Bedlam in Russia today is ironic, since throughout the So-
viet period there was a very romantic view of our culture, the idea that we
shared a common worldview, common values and ideals. And yet clearly
this is far from the truth.

As soon as Gorbachev came to power in 1985, everyone began to say that
_perestroika_ was a revolution. But revolution is not on people’s minds. If you
look at what dominates culture, society, and politics today, it is an agoniz-
ing dirge, the death throes (agoniia) of Soviet civilization. Today, in the wake
of the August putsch, there is the smallest, most emergent of hopes that the
totalitarian infrastructure will disintegrate as well. Until August, that struc-
ture was virtually unshaken. There had been only cosmetic alterations, the
lightest of whitewashings. And in all likelihood, that is all that Gorbachev
wanted, it just got out from under his thumb. It seems clear that he has diffi-
culty even comprehending the changes. What has struck people in the most
fundamental of ways however is the virtual explosion of information, the
shattering of the truth that they once knew, the tragic feeling that for seventy
years, so many people were blind to what was going on about them, and that
so many people perished. Among those lost are not only the people who
were liquidated or who died from hunger, but the people who are seventy
years old today who realize that their entire lives have been built on lost
ideals. We all feel that we are lost, that whole generations have been mis-
spent. I consider myself to be somewhat optimistic, but you can’t help but be
mournful for how things might have been. Hence the feeling of failure, col-
lapse. This is the dying stage of Soviet civilization, one of the most terrible
civilizations of the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, the period of _agoniia_, collapse, failure—it still follows cer-
tain patterns. If we start by looking at the face of things, what is being pub-
lished today? We begin with works by emigre writers of the twenties and
thirties. This is an enormous achievement for us—they are in great fashion
now. People publish them regardless of the quality, people praise them re-
gardless of the level of their work. Another layer is the return of the religio-
philosophical idea of the start of the twentieth century. There has also been
a considerable splash made by Anatoli Rjabov’s _Children of the Arbat_,
_Grossman’s Life and Fate_, works of that type that we call repression litera-
ture. In turn we have the strange works of Rasputin, Belov, and the dere-
venschik (‘village prose writers’) who made their names in opposition to the
government in the 1960s and 1970s and who are far more reactionary
today than Gorbachev. Further still we see the works of the real stone age
Soviet Stalinists like Prokhanov with his book about Afghanistan where he
glorifies our intervention there. We toss in Bulgakov, Mandelshtam, and
a handful of other authors that people had little chance to read for decades. All
of this is found in the same soup, as it were, at first glance. And much of it
hinges on the classic division in Russian culture between the intelligentsia
and the peasantry.

For example, what we see throughout the 1860s is the emergence of the
proletariat, and it is important to understand how the proletariat came to be.
The proletariat arose largely from the outcasts of the peasant culture. The
peasantry was cautious in its relations with outsiders, if not suspicious. They
perceived a strong sense of social injustice and were developing the roots of
class aggression. Yet after the emancipation of the serfs, there arose this
middle group, the proletariat, emigrants from the peasant world, as it were,
who found themselves between the two worlds. Among the educated class
they were nobodies. And when Marxism was introduced to this middle
group, to the proletariat, it was truly a tragedy. It appealed to the lowest
instincts: class revenge, class hatred, brutal redistribution, robbery of the
robbers, expropriation of the expropriators—it was a monstrous program.

The point is that what began in the 1860s as the seeds of the revolutionary
mentality continues to dominate in our society to this very day. This is a
mentality that recognizes the use of violence, that denies the existence of the
individual, that still can not understand the people. I always tell people that
the revolutionary mentality in Russia is not a revolutionary ideology—it is
much greater. It is an existential system; it taps the ontological essence of
man. To look at other ways of life—the only path is the victory of commu-
nism. To look at other persons—there is nothing easier than killing someone
off. With respect to love—betrayal is fine if it is in defense of the revolution. To kill your husband, to kill your lover—these were acceptable themes in Soviet literature when it took place in the name of revolution.

People were killed, and people were shot, and yet there appears to have been general acceptance of the revolution in 1917. How? You yourself know how many people show up at pro-Stalin demonstrations today. And it's not that they are simply villains—these are real people who genuinely feel their path to be the true one.

After 1917, the revolutionary faction found itself with full rein, and it was from there that socialist realism was implemented in art and literature. Indeed, they managed to build up quite a solid system of poetics by the end of the decade. The genre of the socialist, ideological novel was canonized and the parameters were very clear: there was only one type of hero—the choice representative of the working class, a communist in the avant-garde of the revolution; there was only one fabula and one social conflict—the class struggle; and only one structure which reigned over the author's point of view—where the hero was simply a marionette in the service of the prescribed plot. As a matter of fact, you find this approach even in Solzhenitsyn's The Red Wheel, which is also a very ideological novel. This entire artistic mentality was formed with the revolution in 1917.

Therefore, when the derevushchiki appeared in the 1960s, it was like a strange reanimation of the old peasant culture. All of those writers, Belov and Rasputin and Astaev, they all came from the countryside, and in a sense they were an organic link with peasant culture. But, they were not of 1917, but of the 1960s, and by the 1960s there was virtually no peasantry remaining. Peasant culture as it once was had become a caricature. There were still some folk aspects intact, but the Russian Orthodox essence had been extinguished; the peasant ethic had been replaced by a communist one. This is the contradiction at the heart of their work. The romantic peasant ideology cannot be reanimated.

After years of living with fictions, the result is that people are completely unable to deal with real life as it stands before them now. You may recall how Sakharov spoke out at the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 against the Afghan war, when he said that the war was to the detriment of the nation rather than to its honor. They practically burned him at the stake.

Grant: His critics made an enormous impression on me. Especially the woman with the mouth full of metal teeth who demanded to know who it was that had given him the right to disagree.

Beliaia: I remember her. She was haunting. It is a complete inability to confront the truth. It is an entire moral phase, the ability to distinguish right from wrong, that has been distorted.

Today that culture is absolutely impotent. They have no concrete ideas.
"Perestroika has brought me nothing but relief. Whatever good there was in the old system was built on the worst of the human condition. I even come from a rare family, where none of our relatives had been taken away. In almost every family you can find a father or a grandfather who was taken away, but we managed to avoid it. So, on the contrary, it brings me only joy to witness the fall of the empire. I tell my students, who are routinely exhausted and hopeless, "Look around you. Write about what you see. You are witnesses to unspeakably important events."

Vadin Valerianovich Kozhinov is an editor and literary critic. In November of 1991, he set aside his post at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow to assume the head of the conservative literary journal, Nash sovremennik [Our contemporary].

GRANT: Why don't we start with a short biography.

KOZHINOV: Let's see, I was born in Moscow in 1930. I graduated from university in 1954. I started to be published in 1950, that is, under Stalin. But, such has been my life that I have never supported the Soviet government. I could show you now every single one of my articles that I have published since 1950—I've always felt that it is somehow unacceptable for a writer to cite politicians, Stalin, or Malenkov, or worse, Brezhnev—I never was involved in that sort of matter and never used those kinds of words like party, socialism, kolkhoz. I didn't use them, not because I held them to be negative, but because given our circumstances up until recently, it was never really possible to say what you really thought about those kinds of things.

GRANT: What would you say have been the main consequences of perestroika in the writer's world in Moscow over the last five years?

KOZHINOV: Right now I am concerned about the hegemony of the so-called market. Here, strangely enough, everyone has decided that culture must exist under market conditions. Therefore all the publishing houses are on the verge of a complete crash. Editors are able to accept only those books that might bring in a profit. As far as I understand in the United States, only 10 percent of books published bring in any kind of profit. Only 10 percent. Bestsellers, detective novels. Tell me, at the end of your life, is this the kind of literature that you want to reflect back on?

GRANT: What would you want to see happen in order to spare Russian writers from this kind of crash?

KOZHINOV: I think that the position is completely tragic. You've heard no doubt of our proposed economic program, "500 Days," put together by so-called radical economists Shatalin, Yavlinskii, and so on. If you look at the document closely, you can find a small section, "The Nonmarket Sector."

There they mention things like fundamental science, the larger part of the health system and education, culture and art, preserving the environment, and so on, none of which could survive under purely market conditions. And yet it is as if no one has bothered to listen to them. On the one hand, writers have begun to understand that they can't survive in the market system; on the other, the government recognizes that it has no money to support them. Obviously, the future can only be difficult.

GRANT: What has the recent schism in the Union of Writers been about? Is it something entirely internal or do you think that it reflects a broader situation in the country?

KOZHINOV: No matter how people relate to writers, one has to admit that writers in our country are among those who best understand what is taking place. So how has the schism come about? On the one side, you have a group of writers who have come from the heart of Russia, and many of whom who continue to live there, such as Vasilii Belov, who lives in Vologda, Rasputin lives in Irkutsk. These include many of our village prose writers who made their names in the 1960s, writers who truly live among the people, not like in Moscow, which is not quite Russia—it is really something different. And even the remaining people from this group who now live in Moscow, most of them at least spent their childhoods somewhere in the provinces. In a sense, these are people who know the real way of life in the country much better than most. I think that they understand a lot of things correctly.

Alongside them is a second group that by and large has grown up and lived in either Leningrad or Moscow. They tend to be divorced from the pace of life here and orient themselves more to the West. They get fellowships to go to the West and live off of Western funds more often than their own. The best word for them is yes-men: they say everything that the West wants to hear. They know how people in the West view Russia and agree with the Western viewpoint. Naturally, this brings some joy to Western observers. "Look, these people think just like us." What we are looking at is not a correct perception of the country but a will to please others. There are rather a lot of this kind of people—in favor of the free press, in favor of erotica, nihilism, and cynicism. So it is within this kind of framework that the schism took place.

What is interesting is that people have started to revolt against this western orientation. Bear in mind all the writers who emigrated to America in the 1960s. At first they were received with great ceremony, but after a short while it became clear that they were really of no interest to anyone, with very few exceptions. The rest are not needed there; they normally live just to send something back here to be published. Any why are they not needed? Because all they do is repeat what is already said in the West.
GRANT: I wonder how effective dichotomies like East and West or traditional and modern are right now when there are hundreds of competing interests everywhere, endlessly different kinds of nationalism at work.

KOZHINOV: You know, there is the false impression in the West, mostly brought about by émigrés, that in the USSR there is some kind of dominating Russian nationalism. It's far from the truth. I have had occasion a number of times to discuss this with people from the West, who ask me . . .

GRANT: I wasn't actually referring to Russian nationalism . . .

KOZHINOV: Yes, but they ask me, "Why do you talk so much about Russia?" It's as if to ask, How is it that the French, the Germans, the English don't talk about nationalism as much as you do? The difference in Russia is that no one here is confident about their sense of national self-worth. A German, a Japanese person, a Chinese person, they are completely convinced of their national self-worth. Moreover, they are often convinced that they are the most important peoples in the world. In Russia, we have nothing of the sort. Here everyone is not only doubtful that he has a right to reign over other nations, but that he even has a right to exist on this earth. In Russia we have always had a considerable inferiority complex. At least until now, after all these decades of national conflicts, take note that Russians haven't done anything. So far, so far. And I hope that nothing will come about in the next few years. There is virtually no example from history where Russians have oppressed another people. Now, you will say, "What are you saying? What about the state?" But that's another matter. To subordinate peoples in the formation of the state, that is one thing. But to say that Russians, as people, as a nation [natsiia], ever oppressed anyone, that just never happened.

Never over the course of all history.

There is a lot of talk these days about Jewish pogroms. In Russia there was never one Jewish pogrom. Take Russia in and of itself and not the Ukraine, not Moldova, and not, incidentally, the Baltic states where they set upon Jews even before the arrival of the Germans in 1942. In Russia you just won't find that kind of example. I had one friend, one can call him Perestroika, Mikhail Agorski. He and I were quite good friends, and one day I asked him, "Mikhail, you've studied this in depth . . . Can you name even one Jewish pogrom in Russia?" He answered, "Allegedly there was one, in the 1980s, when the workers at a factory beat up their supervisor who was Jewish." So I said to him, "Maybe they beat him not because he was a Jew but because he was the supervisor." The point is that never in a single Russian city was there ever a Jewish pogrom.

GRANT: But how is it possible over all those years to separate the state from the people?

KOZHINOV: I can tell you precisely. It was not a russkaia [Russian] empire; it was called a rossiskaia [Russianist] empire. It was not a Russian one. Nor was it ever a purely national empire. And I can add quite a surprising fact: by 1830, the nobility, the Russian Orthodox nobility, that is, Russians, Ukrainians, and White Russians, also Georgians and Armenians, the Russian Orthodox nobility composed only 45 percent of the nobility in general. 55 percent of the nobility was not Russian Orthodox. This was in part because of the Polish nobility, the Baltic nobility, and the Muslim nobility.

And one can bring up hundreds of examples of how the very highest posts in the Russian state were occupied by non-Russians. The prime minister under Aleksandr II was an Armenian. Or Stolypin, Stolypin himself was more or less the state at one time, but his main deputy was a Jew, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Those kinds of examples are legion. It would never be appropriate to say that the Russian empire was a Russian Orthodox one.

GRANT: What of the rise of nationalism today throughout the USSR?

KOZHINOV: I should emphasize that of all the peoples acting today on the territory of the USSR, Russians are the least nationalist of all. Of course, you can say that there are groups like Pamiat', although as far as I am concerned, Pamiat' is a completely mythological phenomenon. I don't see any Pamiat' anywhere. I live here and all I see are people like Vasil'ev . . . I don't even remember the rest of their names. They are all usually shouting about something. They spend most of their time giving interviews in the West; that's their main hobby. Occasionally you see some young people dressed in black suits, they show them on television. Personally, I've never had cause to run into them. Sometimes you hear about a meeting where someone brings a flag, but I think of that in the same way that I see young people interested in rock music. It's not at all serious, it is a phenomenon largely invented by the mass media. There are those people of course, but they don't represent the people in any way.

Perestroika is complicated because the very leadership itself is contradictory. They have made a complete about-face, but they understand nothing and are doing nothing. That's because they have been educated for forty years or more in this school of dogmatic Marxism and can't think any other way. Who could expect otherwise?

GRANT: But do you think that there is anyone in the country who hasn't been touched by that dogma in some way? Is there anyone else left?

KOZHINOV: Of course, there were people who were dissidents, people who presented themselves in opposition to Soviet power. I include myself among them, I have always been a dissident and never supported the Soviet regime. They tried three times to get me into the Party and I risked losing my job by refusing. Three times. I was lucky that nothing bad ever came of my refusals, although there was a period of two or three years when people...
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would not publish me at all. When it was prohibited to have my name in print.

People like that are numerous, but try and name one important dissident in the government today. You won't find one. Instead you’ll find these orators who get up and curse the past. This is a rather simple game, regretting the past, but what do they have to offer in terms of concrete political programs? I personally don't find it interesting to judge the past, especially when everyone just uses it to their own advantage.

Natalia Borisovna Ivanova, a literary critic distinguished for her work on the Russian writers Iuri Trifonov, Boris Pasternak, and Andrei Platonov, has been among the most active of recent critics of the Soviet literary establishment. She is deputy editor of the literary journal Znamia [The Banner].

GRANT: How would you define “secretarial literature,” the subject of so much of your recent work?

IVANOVA: Secretarial literature is the literature of the nomenklatura. Americans don't generally know what the Soviet nomenklatura means in real life, but for us it is everywhere, certainly in literature. The Union of Writers, which was founded in 1934 at Stalin's initiative, marked the collectivization of writers, the same kind of collectivization that created kolkhozy, collective farms. The union is based on a hierarchical structure, like a pyramid, with the Union Secretariat resting at the top. It's a fascinating organization, all very carefully gradated. There is the secretariat of the umbrella union, the Union of Writers of the USSR, and then several subordinate secretariats, such as the secretariat for each republic. A little lower come the secretariats for Moscow and Leningrad, followed by the provincial capitals, and then further still come a panoply of commissions, such as the Commission on Youth, the Commission on Veterans' Literature, the Commission on Interrepublic Relations—there are millions of them.

Every person belonging to one of these secretariats or commissions had a specified access to privileges. The secretariats worked on the principle of cross-pollination. The Secretaries by definition were given the editorships of various journals or publishing houses, practically for life, and their main goal was to publish either themselves or the work of other editors of similar journals. It was an entirely artificial system based on unlimited resources for maintaining homogeneity in what was published. They were given enormous printings. Each author/Secretary had an entire regiment of critics that were assigned to his work exclusively—an essentially servile criticism, or reptilian criticism, as we used to call it. If you rose to the post of Secretary, someone automatically published a book about you, and usually more than just one. Markov for example, Georgii Markov, who was a Secretary in the

Union of Writers under Brezhnev, was the subject of dozens of monographs. He was the one who awarded Brezhnev the gold medal, the Lenin Prize... for Literature! Brezhnev—one of our most brilliant writers. Amazing. You know, at the time, my reaction was repulsion. I wanted to show this for the face that it truly was. Now, it's more like curiosity. I realize that at the heart of our totalitarian system there were really the most extraordinary things.

GRANT: You use the past tense, but given the recent schism in the Union of Writers, it's unlikely that the totalitarian idea is over.

IVANOVA: Of course not, my goodness, it's all around us. But this is a convulsion of the old guard, this is their dirge. For me that world doesn’t exist any longer, it has already passed. The schism is more about a power struggle between the old nomenklatura and the new establishment, the new establishment being formed from the intermediary elite, people like Voznesenskii and Yevtushenko, let's say, Yevtushenko being the Secretary of the new, alternative writer's union that is battling with the old one. And me—I too was elected to the new union, so I am a Secretary now too! I am Secretary of the Moscow division. But the difference is in our objectives—ours is to disperse the old secretariat and create the kind of writers' union that exists elsewhere around the world. A writer's union should provide some kind of solidarity, some kind of support to writers in general. The problem with the old writer's union is that it was entirely in the service of the state. The new union must be devoid of money, entirely devoid of privileges. Naturally, there is a battle going on. There is an enormous resistance to parting with power. But for me this is the last battle, it has already taken on a historical character.

GRANT: How does that stand up to the kind of statistics you see in the paper every day, wildly varying statistics about how 45 percent of the population supported the August putsch, or 60 percent or 30 percent?

IVANOVA: Or more. That's the force of our collective consciousness. The statue of Dzerzhinskii might have been taken down from in front of the KGB building, but our consciousness, or our subconscious, is still in the throes of the totalitarian system. If anything, most people feel wounded. We were raised with a different ideology than what we have today. It's understandable, it's natural, but it's still a process, an evangelization, a reformation, whatever you want to call it. It's difficult and protracted. You can't say that starting tomorrow the Communist Party is over, that communism will be dead. The communist idea of equality, in particular, is a profound one for the Russian mentality. The society is changing. It is dramatically different than what it was like a year ago, and what it was like the year before that. But the process is painful. It's difficult to reconcile yourself to freedom when you haven't known it for so long. Even birds sometimes want to go back to their cage when their whole life has been spent there. Let alone people,
people today who can't even find bread. So they reinvent the myth of social protection under socialism—all they know is that their lives have gotten worse. Notwithstanding all the people who were killed, all the people who sat in camps, all the people who were political prisoners, all the revelations of the last few years, all the documents, all the facts, all the new publications—they haven't really influenced people that strongly. You might know, for example, that Solzhenitsyn's rating this year is half of what it was last year, his place on the sales lists.

Grant: What do you think is the reason for it?

Ivanova: It's surprising that it didn't produce more of a shock, but who knows? In the first place, there was a flood of his work put out. But maybe more importantly, people just can't take it anymore, they don't want to hear anything more. Most people have stopped reading. I can see that just by readers' reactions.

Grant: One of the things that stands out to me in your work, particularly in your political essays, is the idea of a moral imperative, an appeal to honor. The problem, I suppose, is how to talk about honor with all the stories everywhere about Soviet soldiers who killed other Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan, about officials renowned for their integrity who turned out to be grotesque figures. Is it really possible . . .

Ivanova: To resurrect literature given all that has gone on?

Grant: Is it possible to appeal to morality in a society that might not believe that there is such a thing anymore?

Ivanova: Readership is down everywhere, in every field, for every publication. And you can see this brought about by the disappointment people feel, by the destruction of the country. It's an extremely profound trial, and this is not even the first time that we've had to go through it. You have to realize that in only one century we have lost our homeland twice. In 1917, we lost the old Russia. Today we are losing our Soviet homeland. There is nothing simple about it. You know that old legend, I forget the name of it, about the woman whose father and mother were killed when she was a girl? Her captors sold her into slavery and married her off to one of her parents' murderers, to whom she eventually bore two children. Then, twenty years later, her younger brother arrives to save her. She tells him, "Enough. I've lived through losing my family once already." This is pretty much the same thing we are going through now. The fall of the empire is something we worked toward for years—liberals and democrats—but now that it is happening I don't feel joy, I feel a sense of tragedy. It may be right, it may be what we wanted, but it is still a profound tragedy. People are suffering in the most extraordinary way.

Grant: Are there any positive social values that may be lost through perestroika?

Ivanova: Depends what you mean by positive. That is what I had in mind when I talked about our having lost our homeland for the second time in one century. Remember that the Soviet person in this grandiose system felt himself to be special. He knew that while the rest of the world was in flames, the Soviet Union bloomed; he knew that while the West was riddled by racism, unemployment, and poverty, the Soviet Union strove further and further upward. There was a profound superiority complex. Now, as that mythology crumbles before his very eyes, this fellow plunges from superiority to inferiority, and his consciousness is in shards. No one can survive that steep a drop without trauma. Soviet cinema for them, for example, was like a fairy tale, not only something to stroke their consciousness, but of course, something to mold it. So naturally, the unmasking of the Soviet cultural myth is like an attack on their personal standing, on their personal experience, on their personal experience of the past.

A few weeks back I was walking below ground to the subway and saw a man playing music. Most often the musicians play modern songs, but this man was playing old Soviet ones, and I stopped to look. I wanted to see: Who was standing there, who was giving him money? And this man was playing music. Most often the musicians play modern songs, but this man was surrounded by elderly women who were listening to these songs with delight, because remember, for these people the totalitarian period wasn't just the repelling, terrible Soviet system, if that. It was their youth. Their youth, and furthermore it was their sense of power, their sense of well-being, the feeling of moving ahead under a common cause. It was a highly defined cultural model, fascist of course, but it existed. People today, people that grew up in a collectivist environment, many of whom never really learned to think for themselves—they are lost when they see that there is no more truth, a Soviet truth, at least as it once existed . . . They are lost when they see that there are in fact hundreds of different points of view that all contradict each other. Meanwhile from the West we are being inundated with the castoffs of their cultural production, of the lowest, most extraordinary sort. The first time I went to Paris, I rushed to see films by Bergman and Forman. It was wonderful. Here, we haven't quite made it to Bergman and Forman . . .

Grant: It's mostly pornography.

Ivanova: Pornography, and the very lowest kind of mass culture. Soviet mass culture is basically being replaced by Western mass culture. Where does that get anyone? The average Soviet person—what have you—anyone can see that there is nothing to gain from that and much to lose.

Grant: Given your travels abroad, were you struck at all by the perception of perestroika in the West?

Ivanova: I was surprised, of course. The euphoria in the West has surprised many of us. Just the idea that things here aren't so simple, that Gorbachev leaves much to be desired, that he has excellent translators when he
travels but that many people perceive him here quite disparingly—these are things that most people I met couldn’t understand. But this is not so new: the West didn’t understand us in the twenties, they didn’t understand in the thirties; they didn’t listen to the first wave of emigrants, and they didn’t listen to the second wave of emigrants. No one really expects anything else. With perestroika, the West bought into their own mythology; “Communism has finally fallen, now Russia will be a democracy and we will all live happily ever after.” When the West realizes that the fall of the empire threatens them in the most immediate way, whether through atomic terrorism or the Balkanization of the world, then of course things might be otherwise.

The idea of someone like Urnov or Kozhinov calling themselves dissidents is a new trend. I remember when we were all at the Institute of Literature and they gathered us in the main hall in order to condemn Pasternak. First they brought Siniavskii up on stage and requested that he say what he thought. Everyone knew that Siniavskii had published an article about Pasternak and that Pasternak had liked it very much. Siniavskii has quite a large beard and often mumbled so he kind of hid his mouth and garbled his words. The director said, “Comrade Siniavskii, we can’t understand you.” Siniavskii shrugged his shoulders and left the stage. Then they called up Kozhinov. Everyone knew that he loved Pasternak’s poetry. And he got up and said that Pasternak had no talent, that he had never liked him. He made a compromise, we all know compromise, but to call him a dissident? No. You could never call him a dissident.

—Galina Belaia

Russia is truly a carnivalesque country. A carnival where people are constantly changing places, being turned upside down. Take note that in the West, literature of the absurd is very popular, yet we’ve hardly even heard of it. Why? Because our life is already so absurd that no one needs to read about it. In the West life is so orderly by comparison that absurdity appears as a release of sorts. For us it is quite the contrary.

—Vadim Kozhinov

Aleksandr Andreevich Prokhanov, novelist and critic, was “patriotism coordinator” of the spring 1991 conservative manifesto, “A Word to the People,” which warned of imminent state collapse and the need for an iron hand to reassert order.1 He is currently editor of the newspaper Den’ [Day], formerly listed as “The Newspaper of the Union of Writers of the USSR,” and now listed as “The Newspaper of the Spiritual Opposition.” It is difficult here to convey his brilliant command of Russian at its most florid. We met in the offices of Den’.

—Vadim Kozhinov
free of charge, without a single shot being fired. And this victory, I expect, can only provoke in Americans pride and satisfaction, because that is precisely what it has been, a victory. They should be happy over what has gone on here. However, in the first place it is a satisfaction born entirely from nationalist egocentrism. It can in no way be joy felt for Russia or for Russian people, because what is going on here is horrible, truly horrible. And of course it is satisfaction over the geopolitical consequences of our catastrophe, consequences which will detonate throughout American politics, which are already being detonated and felt—the rise of American globalism and the fall of Euroasian influence.

Can you tell me, does our chaos fit in to the popular idea of the new world order, to new world harmony? We are in complete chaotic pandemonium and there is no going back. What's more, this chaos has spread to Eastern Europe, has destroyed what were carefully implemented economic ties... in a word, Russian chaos. In response to the American variety, we respond with chaos. Whereas before we might have answered with submarines, SS20s and the like, today we answer with chaos. It is completely asymmetrical, a completely asymmetrical response. Something further to confound American rationalism, American logic, and the Rand Corporation—complete chaos. Now we are witnessing the start of the second civil war in Russia over the course of this century. One began the century and now another ends it.

Grant: Within the next few years?

Prokhanov: Absolutely, a civil war, the very contradiction that has been created as the direct result of this catastrophic perestroika. It can not be put off. This contradiction is so deeply rooted and so fundamental that the government, the powers that be are unable even to react to it. It is an ethnic contradiction, nationalist energy, a complex of the most powerful of national contradictions found in the ruins of the former Soviet Union just as well in the heart of Russia. These are fundamental, enormous contradictions, not tempered in any way by culture or civilization, by power or by ideology. They have been torn from the surface and hurled into confrontation. In the first place. In the second place you have the social contradiction. The people have been robbed. A people which over three and four generations has been raised on dogmatic concepts of equality and fairness. These are dogmas which were transgressed often enough, but they nonetheless constituted an ideal. Part of this ideal was realized. But over the course of the last two years this ideal has been completely destroyed. The people has been completely robbed, robbed. And of the prosperity that has been torn from the breast of the people, what remains is in the hands of a narrow, bourgeois cabal. Between this suddenly flourishing social injustice, and the deception and pillaging of some two hundred million people, whether through the KGB or the army or some new guard, it doesn't matter, there will be an explosion. A massive explosion. This national, social contradiction makes the question of this explosion absolutely inevitable. Civil war. That's what I anticipate. What will come after the civil war, that's hard to say.

Grant: Given the mood of the country since the putsch in August, do you see any kind of way out? What would you want to see happen?

Prokhanov: Way out? What way out? I just told you—it's as if you find yourself in the middle of an avalanche on a mountain slope. The first wall of snow overcomes you, then the second, then the third. There is no way out. Of course there will be efforts to turn things around, there will be revolts and counterrevolts, there may be attempts to establish dictatorship, there will be lies, mass exodus, hunger, and poverty. What else can I say? It's like a volcano, a volcano, and how on earth do you stop it? You can't. A year ago we might have turned things around, but now it's impossible. To find something positive in the political crisis today is impossible. Events will develop simply catastrophically.

Yesterday all of Moscow was without bread. Not a loaf. In two weeks I imagine the last rotor will stop turning, stop producing electricity. The state is destroyed, virtually destroyed. And not only the state—the economy is destroyed, the supply system as well. We are after all a centralized state, we have a centralized economy, and if Moscow is destroyed, then there are thousands of ramifications across the country. The whole periphery can only die off, and it is dying off. What are you supposed to do? You can't put the center back together again. I think that even if the putsch had been successful, nothing would have come of it. They were already too late. The economic apocalypse is upon us. That's my point of view.

Grant: What are the social values that you are most concerned about losing as a result? What is lost through perestroika from the point of Soviet culture?

Prokhanov: Everything is lost. Everything. Everything that is going on in our culture today, this disintegration, is loathsome. It's vile. America has flooded us with her spiritual and intellectual detritus. Everything that you see around you on the sidewalks, even in the so-called cultural establishment, it is yesterday's castoffs from the United States. Even Africa pays no attention. That's what things have come to. The talk of a cultural renaissance is utterly misguided.

During the period of stagnation, from Khrushchev onward, we developed an enormous number of positive values. Through a quiet, gradual process, it is as if the culture acquired energy. I mean, I don't even want to talk about it. Culture develops when it has a great task before it. An important task. Religious culture was built on the idea of paradise, for example. Russian
culture, after it was robbed and destroyed by the revolution in 1917, began anew with a slow, gradual process of accumulation and evolution. If our democrats and liberals today think they aren’t worth a dime, then they’re right. But if they have a high opinion of themselves, and indeed most do, then that is the result of their upbringing in Soviet culture. Who was it that created them? Who was it that enabled the flourishing of native cultures in Uzbekistan, in Tajikistan? Where do today’s politicians, those vultures, think they came from? They were raised on Soviet ideas, Soviet programs, they lived in a country with one of the greatest corpus of engineers in the world, a country that was able to develop the best arms in the world. We were able to transform a virtually empty, dead, and soulless country into a thriving intellectual environment, a center of first-class science—what else, avant-garde technology—it is all culture. Our rural writers, for example, embody culture of the highest value. A beautiful culture. It is another matter that our culture was never exposed to the world market. After all, it was controlled for so many years by the communists that the result was utter confusion, when first-class works were sold off for kopecks and fourth-class novels were awarded the Lenin Prize. The result was confusion. So the West may have the impression that our culture was worthless, but I assure you otherwise. It was an impressive, intense, flourishing culture.

Today, after the last six years, this culture is virtually destroyed. Completely destroyed. What they have done with our culture over the last six years is one hundred times worse than what the Bolsheviks managed. We are now in the middle of cultural disintegration, cultural disintegration in all spheres. This is a culture not about to be reviewed. Our culture has been killed off by poverty: it was heavily subsidized by the socialist government. Our culture was killed off by an absolutely counterenational elite that prefers a meaningless generic culture to its own. That is to say, they prefer Western culture, and Western culture of the lowest sort. And of course, of course the culture was also killed off by an absence of strategic objectives. Today’s artists, for example, have lost a feel for the future. This is what has destroyed our culture.

Grant: How do you regard the recent schism in the Union of Writers?

Prokhannov: The schism was nothing new. It has always existed. The antagonism has just been manifested in a more ruthless form. If one were to put it brutally, to put it brutally, our culture has always been divided around two hearths—Westerners and Slavophiles. The Slavophiles orient themselves around the Russian national idea, a Russian Slavic idea which stands in opposition to its Western counterpart. The Westerners, one might say, are more in favor of a universal process than the development of their own culture, and certainly there are impressive examples produced in the West, but...
That's the elite, an elite, like de Benoist. The rightist parties in France, Belgium, Spain, and so on, which resists the imposition of a universal quasi-American standard, a metaphysical culture which has its roots in mysticism and the cosmos, in cultural archetypes. After all, every culture has its own archetypes. People today might not agree on the economy and politics, race and ethos, but they understand the absolutes that elevate them, their beliefs, their mystical experience. In this sense Russian fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism find a common voice in our newspaper. Many of my friends are from Islamic fundamentalist circles. So I repeat, one of main goals is to create an ideology, a new multilayered ideology, an ideology that will promote the complex interaction between individual, social, intellectual, and national development. The ideology would not preclude contradictory positions but would facilitate the formation of hierarchies of knowledge. This is what we're involved in.

Grant: Where will the line be between ideological fundamentalism and economic fundamentalism . . .

Prokhannov: We're still in the process of formulating our strategies. Most importantly, we have our goals, our tasks, and the rest will come in its own time. There are achievements and disappointments along the way, naturally, but so far that kind of boundary has not been defined.

Grant: The only contradiction I see is the economic dimension. On the one hand, you are not proposing a return to the past, but it doesn't seem clear how you want the new society to be economically defined, either with a free market of socialist character or . . .

Prokhannov: Do you really understand what the market system is? Do you really understand? What is it?

Grant: I suppose that the least it means is that people can buy and sell as they like, when they like, and to whom they like.

Prokhannov: Tell me, a project like Los Alamos, the creation of the atom bomb in America, is that a market project?

Grant: Sure it is. Maybe in public it comes across as a government project and might therefore be thought of as part of the nonmarket sector, but there are dozens of huge firms that make profits from projects like that—of course it's a market project.

Prokhannov: My God, what kind of profits are there from the atom bomb? Explain this.

Grant: People make a lot of money off projects like that. It may not be ethical, but that's usually how it works.

Prokhannov: The bomb is paid for by the federal budget. For the federal budget it means razorenie [havoc]. The government assigns a few trillion dollars to the bomb, then finds a few companies to carry out parts of the research, but you can't call that a market. It's more like its own ministry, as we say, it's own superstate. Be it a multinational corporation or a small private company, they all belong to this superstate that directs all the critical social potential. That's how you made the atom bomb and that's how we made the atom bomb. It's been years now since you've have any real kind of market system.
GRANT: But you know perfectly well what I mean by market in the broader context—there’s a big difference between the economic systems in the USSR and Europe.

PROKHANOV: Not at all. What the hell does anyone mean by “market”? What does the market matter when the future of humanity is bound by the same earth, the regulation of common problems. Now we have holes in the ozone layer. What kind of firm is going to want to fix that? Who is going to tell people to cut down on their use of freon? Who is going to have to make modifications to the transport industry? That is the specific domain of state regulation. A typically socialist means. Any future economy, including yours, will depend on the ability of the state to control itself, to control itself, and to direct its own development. The question is how to direct development. I ask you, when mankind has invented already a thousand different ways to direct itself, why the market? To let the floodgates down, with the market mechanism virtually uncontrolled, and then stop it up at a moment’s notice, well, I can’t stand by quietly.

The battle between the forces of memory and the forces of forgetting goes on still. It just takes different forms.

---Natalia Ivanova

Iurii Poliakov, poet, novelist, and critic, age thirty-seven, is the youngest of the six writers here. He began his career specializing in military poetry, or “poetry from the front.” Since 1985 he has become one of the most popular authors in Russia, particularly among youth, with stories ranging from depressing portraits of army life to dry parodies of Soviet bureaucratese to the official aversion to erotica. He fashions himself as a chronicler of Soviet culture, particularly during the Brezhnev period. We met in the House of Literati in Moscow.

GRANT: Let’s start with something about yourself.

POLIAKOV: I was born in 1954 in Moscow and, I think in contrast to most Russian writers, who are either from the Muscovite intelligentsia or from deep within the provinces, I was raised in a working-class family. I attended a pedagogical institute and wrote my thesis on poetry of World War II, poetry from the front. Since 1985 he has become one of the most popular authors in Russia, particularly among youth, with stories ranging from depressing portraits of army life to dry parodies of Soviet bureaucratese to the official aversion to erotica. He fashions himself as a chronicler of Soviet culture, particularly during the Brezhnev period. We met in the House of Literati in Moscow.

GRANT: You’ve indicated an opposition in Russian literary circles between the intelligentsia and the working class, or between the country and the city. What about the popular image of the Slavophiles and the Westerners?

POLIAKOV: It’s an inevitable contrast, and I think that you can find analogies in almost any culture. One side is more inclined to cosmopolitan influences, while another claims the cloak of authenticity through stricter nationalist sentiments. This rivalry in Russia goes back to the nineteenth century, but in the nineteenth century it was never as mean spirited and politicized as it is today. Back then the warring parties were inclined to finish up their debates by sharing a bottle of vodka; now, they are more likely to smash the bottle over each other’s heads. But this is not that strange when you appreciate the crisis we’re in; it brings out all kinds of extremes. I look upon it as an inevitable contrast and even a fruitful contrast, so long as one moderates the aggression inherent in the difference. Today there is an enormous amount of aggression, and next to no moderation.

GRANT: You have the reputation of being a “Soviet” writer specializing in Soviet topics—the Party, the Young Communist Youth League, the army, and so on. What made you want to write about that?

POLIAKOV: One of the peculiarities of our social consciousness, of the communist ideology, was the creation of “Soviet” literature. Stalin created the Union of Writers in 1934 by rounding up writers from a number of different organizations—why, of course, because it was much easier to control them if they were all under one roof. Stalin understood well that Russians had a particular relationship with literature, a powerful relationship and one which could easily serve political ends. Both Franco and Hitler were interested in the question of political culture, but hardly to the same extent as in Russia, where literature has always held the seeds of political power. There is the famous maxim at the end of the nineteenth century that Russia had two czars—Nikolai Aleksandrovich [the monarch] and Lev Nikolaevich [Tolstoy].

The Soviets understood this and imparted to literature its due importance. They collectivized culture, in effect. Peasants were the subjects of the major collectivization, but the creative intelligentsia were the subjects of the minor collectivization. For example, people roundly look with irritation today at the issue of socialist realism. But socialist realism was an intriguing phenomenon, not only as a form of pseudoromanticism in the twentieth century, but as a political apparatus. If romanticism was almost always considered to be an individual experience, here we have an entire aesthetic devoted to the inculcation of popular political ideas into the collective consciousness, in effect, a state romanticism.

One of the most important instruments of this state romanticism was the mythologization of civic consciousness. In place of reality the myth ruled. That which the state feared the most was precisely what became mytholo-
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The question of power, the army, and especially youth. If they were intent on creating the "New Soviet Man," then obviously the new generation was expected to reflect the new system. Everything that was mythologized bore its own importance.

The problem is that real literature can't develop within the framework of false, idealized romanticism. Or at least, literature developed, there were talented writers, but people accomplished this largely by getting around the taboo subjects. One could lose one's head for demystification. The result is a literature where truth can be found only in the pauses between myths.

When I began to write I was sufficiently naive that I wanted to write about precisely that which was taboo, for example, the army. To write about it at that time meant that either you avoided the truth (and there is an entire genre of such military literature) or you ventured into the realm of the symbolic. If you discussed the topic with enough metaphors and allegories you could cloak your real intentions. When I began, I really didn't have any special plan. I just wanted to write something, anything, and so I wrote about what I knew, from when I served in the army. The easiest thing to draw attention to was the stark contrast between the actual experience and that which I had read about and heard about since I had been a small child.

Like most Soviets, I was connected with the Komsomol [Communist Youth League] when I was younger. Almost everyone went through the Komsomol, and, in fact, it's ridiculous when you have one of the new democratic leaders like Afa1as'ev sheepishly admitting that he worked as the deputy chairman of the Lenin Pioneer Scouts. We all know that! The Komsomol is mainly a matter of power. It's an astonishing organization when you consider how little people believed in it yet how forcefully they pretended otherwise. You have entire generations of schoolchildren who don't believe in anything, and teachers who don't believe in anything. But the teachers have to give the impression that they believe in something, and the students have to give the impression that they believe the teacher. It's staggering. How are those relations established? That's what I write about.

GRANT: You have a fairly critical approach to your subjects and yet the groups you criticize—the army, the Komsomol, the Party—are among your most enthusiastic readers.

POLIAKOV: I'm not very comfortable with the Manichean visions of society that divides any group into conservative and nonconservative. It gets absurd. Not all dissidents are heroes. Take Gamsakhurdia for example, a dissident in power if you like. By the same token, not all conservatives are dim-witted patriots; many are quite progressive and thoughtful. The fact that my work has a few admirers in the army (although I suspect there are more opponents than supporters) or a few readers in the Komsomol just goes to show that there have always been some normal people in these organizations that understood that the state had given them the wrong task. In the totalitarian state the individual doesn't choose these things. If someone has any inclination for military life, it's not as if one can join any number of foreign legions. Welcome to the Red Army. If someone has a talent for social activism, where else can they go but the Komsomol? To automatically label these people as conservatives is too simple and often inaccurate.

Unfortunately there are a number of our current leaders who popularize these kinds of conservative-liberal oppositions. This brought us once already to civil war in the 1920s when they decided that the entire gentry was conservative. I am categorically against that kind of thinking. In my work, I would much rather try to explain the mindset of a Party worker than that of a dissident. The dissident one can understand. But who can imagine what goes through the mind of the Party worker?

GRANT: How do you look upon someone like that woman who got up and harangued Sakharov after he condemned the Afghan war at the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989? What can you say to them?

POLIAKOV: That's when art becomes a mechanism of consolation, just as in the United States when people look back on the Vietnam War now through book after book, through film after film. Every new work does its part in helping people to understand what took place. That's really the only way. Sakharov was a brilliant man and an accomplished social activist. He was able to distinguish right from wrong. But how can you lay blame on that woman who had probably spent the last ten years in some regional Party office listening to reports about our soldiers being killed in the name of the Afghan people? It would be more interesting to look at the journalists who produced all those lies, the same journalists who have become such ardent democratic supporters since the putsch. There are correspondents who built their entire careers on Afghan reports who will tell you that they didn't have a thing to do with it. And in a sense, they are also right. For all intents and purposes it was their only means of existence. Someone tells them that they are going to report on the war in Afghanistan and that was it. It was not as if there were competing news agencies that people could switch to.

The whole situation is enormously complicated. However, the idea of individual guilt in a totalitarian system where no practicable political freedom existed is a great topic. It's one of the things that interests me most of all. The story Apofogei is mainly devoted to that. How guilty is someone who didn't have a choice? If someone has a choice, then that's another matter. You have to think, what is fault or guilt all about? It means that you willfully commit an immoral act? Can you involuntarily commit an immoral act? When immorality becomes the status quo, is it still immoral? These questions touch all of us, and we won't be rid of them for decades.
So, while my colleagues are all rushing to write about perestroika, I’m more interested in trying to analyze the period of stagnation. There is nothing along the lines of a serious literary work to remind us of this time in our past.

GRANT: The past is having a hard time these days.

POLIAKOV: I don’t think it’s clear why, for the sake of perestroika, for the sake of a new outlook on everything, why it’s necessary to relegate an entire epoch to complete oblivion. Regardless of what may have been bad and what may have been good. On the one hand, we return to names that were forgotten, that people were forced to forget, and yet at the same time, we create an insecurity complex of grand scale, we tell everyone that their entire lives up to this moment have been an idiotic waste. How, then, are we any different from the Bolsheviks? Anyone who went through school after 1917 was taught that everyone who lived in the time of the czars was either acretinous autocrat or a starving worker. So I’m disturbed by this kind of repetition. Besides, people forget that if things were so beastly and inhuman over all these years, then where did they come from? How did they come to be so civilized in their ways?

It’s absurd to start pointing fingers. I wrote a review once of Brezhnev’s Malai Zemlia when I was in the army; it was perfectly natural. Someone called me in one day, they said, “Private Poliakov, you have a literary background. Write a review of Brezhnev’s book for the army paper.” There was nothing to it. I sat down and wrote. I didn’t give it the slightest thought. It was like drinking a cup of coffee. It wasn’t as if I was part of the resistance; I never did anything so noble. The difference is that I will always remember all of my compromises. When I see people tossing about accusations, that X is a scoundrel or that Z is an anachronism, I remember my compromises.

Not long ago we had another Congress of People’s Deputies. Iurii Kariakin got up to speak. I admire him quite a lot. He got and started to speak to Gidaspov, the former leader of the Leningrad Party organization, the last first secretary of the Leningrad Regional Council. He had worked as a chemistry professor during the stagnation period. Kariakin pointed his finger menacingly at Gidaspov and said, “You, Gidaspov, do you believe in God?” Gidaspov turned red and didn’t know what to say and Kariakin kept on him, “Ahh, exactly.” And everyone started to applaud, satisfied with themselves! Look, I’m sorry, but like everyone else I know that Kariakin used to work at the Institute for the World Workers’ Movement. “And you, do you believe in God?” People have divorced themselves from their own pasts with such alacrity that it is hard to have confidence in them.

It’s as if someone has the given right to call other people to account. But when your conscience is burdened by a mountain of your own compromises, there is no room for appointing yourself as judge. I can’t tell you how much it bothers me. More and more of our current political leaders remind me of chameleons who have just turned from red to green. They’ve managed to just turn green except for a little red at the end of their tails, but they’re already accusing those who haven’t managed to change color as fast. They shout, “How dare you be red? I’m green!” It’s funny, but it’s also sad.

So, it’s everyone to his own conscience. I know that the stagnation period was an important part of my life. I compromised myself for it. I was part of this system, with all its faults and double standards. That’s what makes me want to write about it, to dig into it. And, I suppose, there is part of me that always wants to vindicate my generation, not in a political sense but in a moral sense, to show that it could have turned out a lot worse given the circumstances. Maybe we weren’t dissidents, maybe we weren’t heroes, but there was enough spiritual resistance to hold on to real human values.

GRANT: You are probably one of the few Russian writers who don’t have to worry about the imminent advance of supply and demand in publishing. Does it disturb you that capitalism is going to sink almost the entire Soviet writer’s community as we know it?

POLIAKOV: It’s hard to say because the community itself is so artificial. There were so many illegitimate privileges attached to being a writer for the state that the ranks were unusually swelled. The Union of Writers has always had a lot of accidental writers in it, people who were attracted by all of the perks that it offered. If Brodskii had been a member of the Union of Writers, no one would have ever accused him of not doing enough work, because no one in the writer’s union ever did much of anything. No one would have noticed him. Today most people still don’t write, but that’s because they can finally get on with what they may be better qualified for. We’re still called the Union of Writers, but it’s unlikely that there has ever been another writer’s union so filled with businessmen, bureaucrats, carpenters, and psychics—you name it. There also is the strange question of the state completely supporting writers. On the one hand I find it rather reassuring, but when you meet writers from the West and you wonder what would happen to them if they handed in only a few pages of poetry once very five years, without having worked anywhere, without having taught—you realize how unusual it was. Finally, the system has encouraged a complete disregard for the reader. Half of the successful writers you meet here couldn’t care less whether anyone reads them or not.

Literature’s priestly role was a necessity of the historical zigzag that unfolded over a number of decades. Today the place of the “sacred cows” is being refashioned by real writers, while those who continue to insist on their sacrality are being crowded to the periphery of the literary process. They don’t entirely understand it or perceive it, but the transformation of this role has already taken place.6

—Natalia Ivanova
BRUCE GRANT

Culture is a temple, not a firing range.  
—Aleksandr Prokhanov

Poel! Meierovich Karp, critic and translator, is one of the founders of Vsemirnoe Slovo, a new journal modelled after the French journal, Lettres internationales. We talked in the study of his apartment in St. Petersburg.

GRANT: Why don't we start with a little bit about yourself?

KARP: What can I say? I'm an old guy. I'm sixty-six years old. I started to be published in 1953. You can probably understand why—that's the year that Stalin died. I was almost twenty-eight and I hadn't been able to publish anything for some time. The fact that I am Jewish, that I wasn't a member of the Youth League, among other things, made it complicated. But in one way or another I started to be published in 1953. Then in the years following the death of Stalin, in the 1960s, there was a large wave of activity known as shestidesiatniki [the coming of age for a generation of liberals]. This included a large number of my peers. Half of my generation became would-be reformers in the 1960s, while many of the rest became highly placed Party functionaries that remain in place today. I studied, for example, with Svetlana Stalin, while she was still using her original surname.

I never belonged to the shestidesiatniki because they were people who believed that things could be put right with simple, honorable reforms, to cast out the corrupt communists and replace them with honorable communists. One could still find upright communists in those days, but they were awfully few. In my parents' generation there were far more, but it is not as if much good ever came of honorable communism in any event.

It was a strange time. If before we were always supposed to say that everything was good, in the 1960s we were supposed to say that everything will be good. I had different feelings, that it wasn't all real. But what was real? Things had gotten better after the death of Stalin, in certain respects. And in any event I was interested in lots of different things. Essentially I worked on translations and wrote on ballet theory more or less until the arrival of Gorbachev.

When Gorbachev first appeared, you could see that his era represented something substantively different from the period after the death of Stalin, the Khruschev thaw, although Gorbachev himself is the typical kind of person that you would have found back in that time, a real shestidesiatnik, and for that matter, a tragic figure who never seemed to understand entirely what he was getting the country into.

GRANT: Would you say that the current situation in the Union of Writers reflects the position of the country as a whole?

KARP: In a broad sense, yes. Like the rest of the country, writers have had to question their very existence, their way of working. There was
The mission of the old union all these years has been so absurd. You know, religion has never been very influential in the country until just a few years ago, and in the place of the priest we had writers—local, accessible priests of ideology who were supposed to propagate the word of the state. It was in this respect that the state supported writers. But a writer is something different altogether, he has a different place in society. You can't determine in advance what he will say. If everyone already knows what they are going to say, what are they good for? The best writer is someone who opens up a world for us that, on the contrary, we didn't know was there, someone who shows us things that we haven't noticed, that we haven't felt. Someone like Lev Tolstoy. He opened up a new world. Tell me, honestly, what kind of key. Westerners

Lev Tolstoy. He opened up a new world. Tell me, honestly, what kind of writer with a difficult character and a lust for greatness, and with an enormous potential for religious influence? Yet he turns out to be a brilliant writer. No one could foresee that. That was Lev Tolstoy.

Grant: With regard to the rhetoric of the old guard, do you see any sense in their insistence that they are on the side of Russian patriotism, the Russian idea, that they return to the conflict between Slavophiles and Westerners?

Karp: I think that it's just to attract attention. What was the Slavophile/Westerner debate about anyway? You know it wasn't that different from similar debates in Germany. It's well known that the famous Slavophiles were epigones of German romanticism, Schelling and so on. It was really a question of the fullness of bourgeois development. That is really the key. Westerners wanted a faster pace of development. The Slavophiles, well, the Slavophiles weren't against it, they also stood for the emancipation of the serfs; they just wanted a smoother, milder transition. There's a lot of that in Tolstoy. But when you look at people like Bondarev, Rasputin, you have to understand that these people support the most reactionary elements in our society, the preservation of this system. They aren't interested in changing anything, either with ease or with difficulty. They work in tandem with military generals. What kind of parallel could there be with Slavophiles?

Proponents of the Russian idea pay lip service to Russia but their real goals are imperial in nature. Look at the Kuril Islands. You couldn't imagine anything less Russian—Shikotan, Kunashir. But for them it's Russia, because Russia for them is not a place where Russians have lived since the beginning of time, Russia for them is the places that Russia has conquered. For them, Uzbekistan is Russia. Warsaw is Russia. Budapest is Russia, and so on.

The derevenschik are fond of thinking of themselves as Slavophiles, but who were they anyway? The village theme, the idea of the ravaging of the countryside wasn't invented by them. A number of people precede them. I don't want to say that these are bad writers. Below's A Matter of Habit is a good story. It is part of a literature of suffering. If you read A Matter of Habit you feel for the hero, and you see that the peasant in Russia lives terribly. It's true. And the fact that these writers told the truth is very good. But it's not the whole truth. If you want to tell the story of the Russian peasant, you have to ask why he lives terribly. The peasant lives terribly because he was robbed. He was denied the right to earn a living off the land. For years Russia had a revolutionary agrarian movement whose sole purpose was the liberation of the peasantry. There was even a prerevolutionary group, Land and Will. What made them want to try to kill the czar, one of the most liberal, prudent czars that Russia had ever had, Aleksandr Nikolayevich? He liberated the peasants, but he didn't give them land, and will without land led to the peasants' ruin. The same has been the case with Stalinist collectivization.

Grant: So the twentieth century repeats much of the nineteenth?

Karp: Of course. A great crisis hung over the end of the nineteenth century as well. But Russia has always suffered from two main kinds of problems, agrarian and nationalist. England, and moreover France, were much clearer on the latter point. The colonies were overseas. India was a separate country. For us, who knows where our colonies are? Englishmen were conscious of the fact that it was an empire, that England and India were two different countries. But tell me, can the average Russian tell the difference between Novgorod and the Kuril Islands? Not likely. The agrarian problem has not changed that much either, ironically. In principle it changed with the October revolution, but not for long. Before you knew it, collectivization created another kind of servitude, perhaps an even worse one than before, not better. In that transition we lost an enormous number of people, talented, resourceful, good people. It's staggering.

Grant: We were speaking earlier of the idea of surrealism, which people often invoke to explain the popularity of Soviet culture. What about today? People know that the very state has disintegrated to the point of disappearance, chaos engulfs everything, yet most people still go about their business, it almost seems to be normal on the surface.

Karp: The impression of normality is just inertia. I can't assure you that even in two months we will still have that veneer. There are parts of the country right now where people are completely up in arms, where huge crowds gather in the main squares and just stand there, staring. Demonstrations go on for two and three weeks. People are not going about their business. The tension is enormous.

When people walk around today, all these smart alecks say, "Look, communism is dead, it was all rubbish, it was all evil people who deceived us." Well, that's just not true. That's just not the case. All Marxism did was fail to manifest itself to the full. All it manifested was its partiality, the pur-
tial truth that it only could manifest. People who believed the whole package now walk around crying fraud. They set off on a bridge that never reached the other side! It was just never built to get to the other side. Of course they ended up in the river. That's the way it was.

GRANT: There is an enormous urge people have to throw everything out the window in order to start anew.

KARP: Right, but bear in mind that no one is throwing anything out the window. All they are doing is renaming everything. If you look at the question of Leningrad or St. Petersburg, of course I am for the reinstatement of the name Petersburg. I don't think that one should be able to rename cities that played an important role in the history of man. You can't rename Rome or Moscow or Kiev. It's absurd. For the same reason Petersburg should have stayed intact. It was a profound mistake, and I am for correcting it. But you can't conclude that just because we are changing the name, anything else will change. The tragedy is that Bolshevist ideology hasn't gone away, it has just been renamed. It has stayed in place exactly the same as before. Instead of saying that they will shoot you in the name of the World Worker's Movement, if you can imagine that, now they say they will get you in the name of the prosperity of the Russian people, or the prosperity of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is almost down to that. If you are willing to coerce people into following your reform program, or your church, what is the difference what you call yourself?

People talk about a democratization of popular consciousness, but where are the democrats? There are rather a lot of reactionaries about. There is a certain stratum of reasonable conservatives, people like Gorbachev. There is a certain stratum of liberals, but an absolutely negligible number of democrats. No democrats! There is no one willing to listen to their opponents. There is no one interested in representing their constituencies. People even call Mikhail Sergeevich a democrat. What kind of a democrat is that? He's a smart person, that's all. He was against a multiparty system for years, against private property, and most importantly of all, against the self-determination of nations. Look at how many decades this has gone on. How many years, and for what?

Notes

1. The original transcripts are up to three times as long as those presented here. In the editing, the original sequencing of the remarks was preserved. The interviews were conducted in Russian and all translations are my own. All comments are direct quotations unless otherwise indicated.

2. A radical Russian nationalist group known for its anti-Semitic activism. The founding of the group at the outset of perestroika was one of the more controversial results of Gorbachev's campaign for openness.