

Vladimir Sorokin's vision of homo sovieticus

# Step in line

ZINOVY ZINIK

Vladimir Sorokin

THE QUEUE

Translated by Sally Laird  
280pp. New York Review Books.  
Paperback, £7.99.  
978 1 59017 274 4

ICE

Translated by Jamey Gambrell  
304pp. New York Review Books. £13.99.  
978 1 59017 195 0

DEN' OPRICHNIKA

222pp. Moscow: Zakharov.  
978 5 81590 625 5

SAKHARNYI KREML'

347pp. Moscow: AST.  
978 5 17054 584 1



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invisible author whose mouth remains shut. We overhear the conversations of citizens standing in a queue as they squabble, gossip, exchange goods and conduct adulterous affairs. Sorokin is indeed, as Laird remarks, “a brilliant ventriloquist”. He developed this style of “objectivism” (which is part and parcel of the Soviet school of socialist realism) by learning from visual artists – his Moscow friends who, in the 1970s, were the first to realize that Soviet propaganda had ceased to be just propaganda, and had become the new reality. Artists reacted to this omnipresent Soviet reality by depicting it as it was – with its ceremonial public face of people’s palaces and parades, social housing and industrial slums, and with the party slogans and communal misery that penetrated every aspect of daily life. Rather than parodying this reality, they chose to expose it in all its absurdity. The movement, which was eventually branded Sots Art by the duo Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, mirrored the over-production not of consumer goods (as in Pop Art) but of Soviet socialist ideology. In his stories and novels, Sorokin also resorted to the imagery of classical socialist realism in order to depict the nightmares of his contemporaries.

It is easy to understand why Sorokin is so admired in Germany. In her extraordinary study, *The Third Reich of Dreams* (1968), Charlotte Beradt remarked that “the Nazi official who maintained that people could lead a private life only in their sleep certainly underestimated the power of the Third Reich”. She cites a German psychoanalytic patient who

“no longer dreamt about anything but rectangles, triangles, and octagons”, in order “to avoid risk altogether by dreaming nothing but abstract form”.

In such dreams, any expression of personal, idiosyncratic thought was deliberately eliminated. One of the most illuminating pages in Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) describes her subject’s inability to use words outside official phraseology. “Officialese” became Eichmann’s only language, Arendt writes, “because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché”.

Parallels between Nazi and Stalinist ideology have been explored systematically by Sorokin, especially in his “poem in prose”, *A Month in Dachau* (1992). Of course, instances of collective brainwashing can also be found beyond the domain of Soviet or Nazi ideology. Sorokin-like characters may be spotted in horror and sci-fi movies about zombies, or in propaganda films made during the anti-Communist hysteria in the United States, or even in Quentin Tarantino’s films featuring dimwit adherents to a tribal criminality.

The omnipresence of a ruling ideology in the minds of its subjects is not uniquely “totalitarian” and could have been diagnosed, say, in British colonial rule of the Victorian era, or among Zionist settlers in Palestine in the 1920s. And yet, in all these instances, the occupation of private space is not absolute: a strip of land remains amid the sea of bullshit. The portrait of Queen Victoria might have adorned many parlour walls of the British

Empire as a precursor of Big Brother; but in Stalinist Russia, people were known to have been arrested for using pages of *Pravda* bearing Stalin’s portrait in the lavatory. A KGB man was said to hide in every toilet bowl in the country.

Sorokin’s conclusion is that in Stalinist Russia, as in Nazi Germany, the mere notion of the private world was simply not applicable. Laird remarks that although the phenomenon of the queue is far from unfamiliar to the English reader, for Sorokin it is a drama of “entrapment in a society steeped in violence, brutality, hypocrisy, and sham”. The whole Soviet nation, even the residents of the Kremlin, is queuing in one way or another for something unknown to be doled out at an unknown time. The queue has no beginning or end, as people step out of one queue only to join another. Life is a queue and the queue is life.

In a new afterword to *The Queue*, Sorokin reminds us that in Soviet times standing in a queue was at once a job, a duty and a communal service. All these terms are covered by the Russian word for a church service, *sluzhba*. Moreover, “in the Russian Orthodox Church there are no pews, people stand during the service”. Sorokin concludes that “the queue was a quasi-surrogate for church”, after which “instead of the Eucharist and absolution of their sins, people received foodstuffs and manufactured goods”.

Over time, Sorokin’s metaphors for the Soviet version of the eucharist have become increasingly sinister. In his novel *The Norm* (1994), Sorokin’s response to Brezhnev’s era of stagnation, every Soviet citizen is required to consume a daily ration of repellent brown stuff packaged in mass-produced cellophane wrappings. Life in the country goes on “as normal” (or as described in the pages of *Pravda*), even though this daily “norm” consists of human excrement.

What has emerged with the collapse of the Soviet system is a collectivism in disguise, and it is this that Sorokin has sought to unmask in his recent novels. *Ice* was published in Russia in 2002, the same year that “Moving Together”, a pro-Kremlin youth group of blue-eyed, blond Slavs acting with the tacit support of Russian Orthodox circles and other patriotic groups, attempted to sue Sorokin for “distributing pornography”, citing his novel of 1999, *Blue Lard*, which showed Stalin and Khrushchev indulging in buggery as a patriotic duty for the sake of Party unity. In the ideological vacuum that followed the demise of the Soviet Union, both crypto-Fascists and bizarre mystic movements emerged. These are the trends explored by Sorokin in *Ice*.

The novel portrays the members of a secret Gnostic sect. Blond and blue-eyed, they are looking for fellow brethren lost among the common herd. The brethren must be awakened so that a new order may be established, in which the universe will be released from

its erroneous earthly bondage to be transformed into pure “Primordial Light”. Awakening is achieved when a person’s chest is struck hard by a hammer fashioned out of cosmic ice. If that person is one of the chosen, he begins “to speak with his heart” (an allusion to a popular Soviet song about a mighty hammer that strikes a spark from the steel chest of the proletariat). A link with an alien civilization is established when we learn that the sacred ice is secretly excavated from the Siberian site where the Tungus meteorite – the biggest ever found – had landed a hundred years earlier. In order to gain permanent access to this site, the sect has infiltrated every echelon of power throughout modern history; it has members in key positions in the Politburo and the Nazi party, in the KGB and now the Kremlin. Eventually, it succeeds in creating a production line of ice hammer kits for home consumption in the Russia of today. Sots Art acquires here its capitalist Pop Art veneer. But two major emotions – enforced optimism and state-induced fear – continue to feed off each other on a massive scale.

It was Stalin who, in the Second World War, recruited the Church as an ally in his

effort to whip up patriotic feeling in the face of Nazi aggression and to hold on to his power. In Sorokin’s vision of modern Russia, Communist ideology has been replaced by home-brewed mysticism and Russian Orthodoxy, with the Church (once a regular supplier of informers in the Soviet era) proving no less ferocious in its zeal to control the masses than was the former KGB (some of whose members now run the Kremlin). In his latest novel *Den’ oprichnika* (A Day in the Life of an Oprichnik, 2006), and the collection of stories *Sakharnyi Kreml’* (The Sugary Kremlin, 2008), Sorokin has transposed the hybrid of the state security apparatus and the Russian church into the near future. The result in both cases is a surreal satire on Putin’s Russia, a dystopia in which medieval costume and ceremony, preposterous Slavic archaisms and technological neologisms, are fused with hi-tech modernity and strict loyalty to the state. The narrative contains a heady brew of folksy sentimentality and sadism, a parody of the Russian fairy tale.

*Den’ oprichnika* is a chronicle of daily life in the Kremlin’s terror squad (the *oprichniki* were the “KGB” of Ivan the Terrible), in

which blood, sex and brutality are mixed with patriotic, anti-Western zeal and sickening piety. The country appears as a resurrected Greater Muscovy separated from the West by a “Great Russian Wall”. As in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*, the world is divided into super-states, with Europe as a rotting non-entity, completely dependent on Russian oil. Stylistically, this tour de force could be traced to Anthony Burgess: the role played by Russian in *A Clockwork Orange* is given here to Chinese, the lingua franca in a futuristic universe determined by China’s technological superiority. The novel is a powerful intellectual feat, wedding the Soviet nightmare of the radiant future to the Nazi glorification of the past.

One of the stories in *Sakharnyi Kreml’* is again entitled “The Queue” and it marries the bygone Soviet Russia with her fictional authoritarian future. It is a deliberate replica of the queue that Sorokin described two decades ago. Now, the queue is set in a clerical, pious, authoritarian and xenophobic Russia, which is prone to obscenity and sadistic violence, backward-looking yet well-equipped with modern technology. An adulterous liaison is formed between two sleazy

characters queuing for pieces of “sugary Kremlin”, which seems to be a type of sweet. The shop is running out of its most desirable product, “Kremlin’s Chimes”, so the queue has no choice but to buy chunky bits of “Kremlin’s Wall”, which characters trade for sex and privileges.

What is left of the human being in Sorokin’s universe when he tries to divest himself of his collective ideological clothing? No more than a bare forked animal, a beast wallowing in dirt. The moment Sorokin’s heroes drop their philosophizing (draped in party slogans or the clichés of mass culture) about the complexity of life and the future of mankind, they get down straightaway to the business of ritualized murder, bizarre sex, rape, incest, cannibalism and copophilia. The Soviet system has been dismantled, but its zombies have crawled from the ruins, “trading in their black Volga limousines for black German-made sedans”. What in Sorokin’s early books was a parody, a macabre fantasy about homo sovieticus, has now materialized as the fleshy beast of a neo-Russian wallowing in petrodollars. Sorokin continues to observe this process with horror and fascination.

## Lost in the labyrinth

UILLEAM BLACKER

Yuri Andrukhovych

THE MOSCOVIAD  
Translated by Vitaly Chernetsky.  
185pp. Spuyten Duyvil. Paperback, \$14.  
978 1 93313 252 5

Set in Moscow during the last days of the Soviet Union, *The Moscoviad* follows Otto von F, a Ukrainian poet, on an urban odyssey of drink, sex and arguments about national identity. Beginning with a riotous, politically incorrect depiction of a student dormitory in which the different nationalities of the Soviet Union try to co-exist, the novel proceeds through scenes of violence and excess on the streets of Moscow, until Otto finds himself lost in a labyrinth of underground tunnels. He becomes caught up in a KGB plot to breed mutant rats and take over the country, and stumbles on an orgiastic masked ball where historical characters from Lenin to Ivan the Terrible are discussing how to secure the future of the crumbling empire. The finale is a horrifying piece of dystopian fantasy, from which Otto barely escapes with his life.

The fast-moving plot is interspersed with Otto’s recollections of his dealings with the KGB and with dreams about an imaginary Ukrainian king. Conversations with the monarch celebrate the richness of Ukrainian culture in a way that is both sincere and ironic, slipping seamlessly from sophisticated intertextuality into a nonsensical parody of the reverence with which Ukrainians traditionally treat their culture. Dialogues with a sinister KGB agent provide an acute portrait of the moral dilemmas of the writer under a totalitarian regime.

The fragmented and chaotic structure of the novel is reflected in its language. Yuri Andrukhovych mixes poetic prose in Ukrainian with phrases of mostly obscene Russian, hybrid forms of Ukrainian-Russian dialect and the odd snatch of German or English. Vitaly Chernetsky concedes that much of this is untranslatable and makes few efforts to indicate the novel’s linguistic variety. He does a good job of opening the novel up to the English-language reader, mainly through concise and unobtrusive footnotes; but his translation is marred by some literal rendering of Ukrainian idioms and syntax.

*The Moscoviad*, which was first published in 1993, is Andrukhovych’s third novel to be translated into English, after his debut, *Recreations*, and *Perverzion*, which is probably his

*Chowringhee* is a teeming saga that depicts the relationships, private histories and appetites of the staff and customers of the Shahjahan, a luxury hotel in Chowringhee, the upmarket district of Calcutta. Sankar’s novel was first published in Bengali in 1962 – predating by three years Arthur Hailey’s *Hotel* with which it shares superficial similarities – and was made into a popular Indian film in 1968. Arunava Sinha’s Indian-accented English translation reads smoothly.

It is written in the first person in the form of the memoir of a junior employee called Shankar. Endlessly curious about other people, he is a captivating storyteller. As a teenager, he is a “babu”, a clerk to the last English barrister. When that kind employer dies, Shankar is reduced to peddling waste-paper baskets to the offices of Calcutta. Then his friend Byron, an Anglo-Indian detective, secures him a position at the Shahjahan Hotel by calling in a favour from the manager.

The hotel is an “awe-inspiring” place

best work. While his success in the English-speaking world has been modest, his books have enjoyed an enthusiastic reception in Germany and Central and Eastern Europe, winning several international literary awards. At home, he is a literary celebrity: having started out as a performance poet, he turned to prose, essays, journalism, drama, rock and jazz, and is now known as much for his political journalism as for his fiction. By introducing irreverent postmodern aesthetics to a culture which has often taken itself too seriously, his work represents a watershed in Ukrainian literature.

Andrukhovych’s writing is defined by the cultural and political tensions that derive from Ukraine’s location on the edge of Europe, between East and West, and from its vexed relationship with Russia. In attempting to construct an essentially European identity

for Ukraine, he depicts Russia as a brutal, incomprehensible Other, viewed through national stereotypes and misogyny. Moscow is “the last city of Asia”, a nightmarish labyrinth of alcohol and oppression. In one scene, Otto has sex with his Russian lover, a violent, unpredictable and possessive alcoholic, before knocking her unconscious and escaping. Anti-Russian sentiments of this sort are rare in Andrukhovych’s more recent prose and in contemporary Ukrainian literature in general. What remains painfully relevant, however, is the novel’s expression of Ukraine’s wounded longing for a Europe that has forgotten it:

Sometimes we dream of Europe. At night we come to the banks of the Danube. We seem to recall something: warm seas, marble gates, hot stones, southern vines, lonely towers. But this doesn’t last long.

Sankar  
CHOWRINGHEE  
Translated by Arunava Sinha  
416pp. Atlantic. £15.99.  
978 1 84354 913 0

with its own complex internal economy and a peculiar system of time measured by the regular service of tea, meals and drinks. “It was incomparable”, Shankar says; “It wasn’t so much a building as a mini-township”. The manager is Marco Polo, a temperamental man, the hotel’s “all-in-all”, who ingratiates himself with his spoils, complaining guests and inflicts terror on his staff. He also periodically embarks on destructive drunken binges – a result perhaps of his painful personal history, brought up as an orphan in Italy. He has engaged Byron the detective, Shankar’s friend, to track down his wife who left him for a GI after the war.

People trust Shankar with their most shameful secrets. He shows particular sympathy for exploited women, among

them Connie, a dancer from Scotland, who performs a racy act with the assistance of a dwarf who is really her brother, and secretly yearns for dignity, and Karabi, the hostess, who entertains businessmen in suite Number Two and pursues a tragic affair with the son of two local bigwigs Mr and Mrs Pakrashi.

Shankar displays a strong moral sense shaped by his early grounding in the system of law and justice. He examines with a light ironic touch the hypocrisy of sensual and self-seeking “philanthropists” such as the Pakrashis and criticizes the behaviour of other members of Calcutta high society: the medical specialists, politicians, sportsmen and “the kings – the kings of jute, oil and butter”. He likes to say that the hotel is a “jungle”; but Shankar is an optimist who notices beauty everywhere. He tells a bitter-sweet story of India relishing her new independence and of successful gangsters who “don’t know how to use a knife and fork”.

ANDREW M. BROWN