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Walter F. Kolonosky  
*Kansas State University*

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**Marcus C. Levitt and Tatyana Novikov, eds. Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture**

**Abstract**

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**Keywords**

violence, Russia, Russian literature, Russian culture

## Review Essay

Marcus C. Levitt and Tatyana Novikov, eds. *Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture*. Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 2007. 324 pp.

While violence is a given in Russian literature and culture, its presence does not suggest that Russian civilization is characterized by a bloody monochromatic hue. In his introduction to *Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture*, Marcus Levitt, in fact, readdresses claims about the underpinnings of violence in Russia's troublesome evolution. Setting the stage for twenty-six new essays about violence in Russia, he raises questions about the alleged determinants for Russia's national character, including a harsh climate, exposed boundaries, abusive rulers (e.g., Ivan the Terrible, Nicholas I, Alexander III, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin) and lingering absolutism. Not only does he minimize the scope of Mongol influence, but he also takes issue with H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse's notion that the roots of violence lie at the very foundation of Russian historical consciousness. What he posits is that Russians have been anxious about violence, viewing it as a central problem. Putting aside claims about "Tatarized" Russians and the "neo-Cainism" of the last century, Levitt draws our attention to Russia's bi-polar system of values and the ensuing contradictions thereof. He then provides a brief commentary on the essence of these essays and their historical and thematic correlations.

While the subtitle of this collection suggests a two-sided context for the study of violence, the reader may be puzzled as to why literature is not a part of culture rather than something in addition to it. The title, *Times of Trouble*, together with the reproduction of Ilya Repin's painting on the cover, is rich in referentiality, for it points to the legacy of Ivan the Terrible as a touchstone for the presence of violence in all periods of Russian history. Outside of two essays that conjure up the excesses of Ivan the Terrible, only Charles Halperin turns to the history of early Russia. Sifting through events over an eight-hundred-year period, he insists that the level of violence in Russia, at least until the advent

of modern history, was comparable to that of Europe—in spite of the fact that sixteenth-century travelers were horrified by what they saw in the Muscovy of Ivan the Terrible.

No study of violence in Russia would be complete without pausing to ponder the reign of Ivan the Terrible—legends notwithstanding. In fact Repin's 1885 painting captures the horror of Ivan upon realizing that he just killed his son. Kevin Platt's essay considers the violence that this allegorical painting conveys, evokes (e.g., Abram Balashev's slashing of this canvas on exhibit and Maksimilian Voloshin's provocative lecture shortly thereafter) and implies (violence is a harbinger of violence: the assassination of Alexander II). Maureen Perrie, on the other hand, compares the brutal policies of Ivan the Terrible to those of Stalin, drawing attention to parallels in the use of security police (the *oprichniki* and the KGB), public executions (under Stalin, show trials), torture and an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. She then comments on Stalin's efforts to *enhance* the harsh demeanor of Ivan the Terrible in, for example, Aleksei Tolstoy's play and Sergei Eisenstein's film.

Two essays focus on the practice of capital punishment in nineteenth-century Russia. In her discussion of the execution of five prominent Decembrists, Ludmilla Trigovskaya argues that Nicholas I was not successful in denying a platform for martyrdom by arranging a hush-hush hanging. Rather, by preventing the amassing of a crowd for this spectacle, Nicholas I opened the door to speculation and scandal regarding the protocol of public executions. The absence of a proper execution, in fact, drew attention to the fate of these Decembrists. Without the ritual of closure, their story took flight, fueled first by indignation, then by sympathetic memoirs, memorials, monuments and literary accounts. On the other hand, Ilya Vinitsky argues that Vasily Zhukovsky (1783-1852), a leading romantic versifier in Russia's golden age of poetry, saw capital punishment in terms of redemption, going so far as to regard the scaffold as a holy place, a site of "symbolic purification." Discussing Zhukovsky's infamous essay, he fleshes out its context in the Berlin riots of 1848, the revisions to the Prussian Criminal Code, the execution of Frederick and Maria Manning in London and Nicholas I's "mock execution" of the Petrashevsky circle, not to mention the lingering squabbles of pietists and liberals, as well as the weighty opinions of writers such as Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy.

To some readers, literature is the sum of its reflections on a given era. To David Powelstock this sum lies at the heart of Mikhail Lermontov's writing, a sum that is marked by violence. According to Powelstock, Lermontov's themes of violence, which are anchored in rebelliousness and the Romantic fashion of the day, acquired a "sharper focus" after the death of Alexander Pushkin in 1837. He in fact reduces *A Hero of Our Time* to a study of violence on the basis of an extended conspiracy, a murder, the vengeance of the Circassians, a duel and Russia's brutal treatment of the native tribes in the Caucasus. Above all, he

claims that Lermontov's novel parades not only overtly violent acts, but also "rhetorical and cognitive violence."

Two essays focus on violence in the writing of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Harriet Murav argues that Dostoevsky incorporated not only acts of violence in his works, but also performative statements which act upon characters in the text and readers of the text, evoking, in her opinion, pain, humiliation and fear. In her elucidation of performatives, she points out that through references to violence, namely in a confession, an accusation and a death sentence, characters are emotionally impacted. Discussing the impact of Ivan Karamazov's account of abused children on Alyosha, Murav claims that such an account changes the boundaries that separate the speaker from the listener and becomes the matrix that aligns or re-aligns Dostoevsky's characters in painful points of contact. Disappointed in the dismissal of *Netochka Nezvanova* as moralistic, monotonous, and incomplete, Elena Krasnostchekova explains that Dostoevsky's novel is not just another narrative of human degradation, but a bildungsroman—a well wrought bildungsroman. She has in mind the revised version of 1860, when Dostoevsky abandoned the headings: "Childhood," "A New Life" and "The Mystery." Anticipating headings such as "Childhood," "Adolescence," and "Youth," she goes into detail about how *Netochka* qualifies as a bildungsroman, and how its stages of violence correspond to stages of growth.

Fifteen of the essays focus on what may be considered the darkest of all periods in Russian history, that is, the Soviet period, with its relentless repression, KGB spies, prison camps, pogroms, deportations and suffocating control of the printed and spoken word. Focusing namely on Stalin, Arch Getty puts together a statistical discussion of arrests, executions, and prison sentences, with a reminder of the high level of atrocities that were committed during the collectivization and the Great Terror. Most important, he puts together an overview of the theories, outside of paranoia, that account for Stalin's policies (e.g., cunning, persuasion, coercion, fanaticism, caprice, ideological tinkering, and unprecedented theatrical mobilization).

Daniel Brower looks back to the roots of the revolutionary intelligentsia, which, in the 1870s, turned to murder as its principal mode of action. He, in fact, points out that Russia is the first country where terror became an expression of political opposition. He argues that although not all radicals condoned murder, the mood of the times was conducive to justifying, if not sanctifying, drastic action. Moreover, according to Brower, radicals such as Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Dimitrii Pisarev and Sergei Nechaev encouraged a rejection of traditions, including institutional and family authority. Fueled by an ideology that did not hold back any contempt for the establishment, more and more radicals came to believe, as did Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, that the ends justify the means. It was Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76), "the father of anarchy," who inspired many radicals in the nineteenth century. J. Frank Goodwin, however, points

out that this inspiration was short lived. Arguably, Bakunin had a modest following in the revolutionary movement in Russia and abroad. Above all, he was the spokesperson for anarchy, providing Nechaev, his operative in Russia, with a rationale and a blueprint for political assassinations. Goodwin explains that Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and even Sergei Plekhanov renounced Bakuninism. In the Social-Democratic Party only Lenin and a small band of followers clung to the idea of the complete eradication of the existing order.

In the opinion of Anna Geifman, state-sponsored terror began with Lenin, who linked his Bolshevik policy of Red Terror with the Jacobin Terror of 1793. It was namely the Cheka that carried out this policy, seeking, at first, speculators and saboteurs and then alleged class enemies, including former Tsarist officials, imperial army officers, members of the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia and the clergy. And she reminds us that what made the Cheka more terrifying was its large number of unsavory operatives, that is, common criminals, hooligans, sadists—the riffraff of society who did not think twice about murder, robbery, beatings or torture. Nina Efimov argues that examples of KGB violence are widespread in the writing of Vasilii Aksenov. After providing a summary of Aksenov's life and works, she discusses *The Burn*, the core of which, in her opinion, consists of nauseating violence. Not only does she ascribe naturalism, that is, philosophical determinism, to this postmodern novel, but also to Aksenov's vision of Sovietization.

One of the targets for repression under both the tsars and the Soviets was the Jews. Brian Horowitz looks specifically at the response of Russian-Jewish writers to a succession of pogroms from 1881 to 1917. According to Horowitz, their response, which included graphic literary portraits of the pogroms, was contradictory, ranging from appeals to Jewish nationalism and political radicalism to Russian patriotism. Examining the writing of Simeon Frug, Lev Levanda, Mark Varshavsky, Sergei Yaroshevsky and David Aizman, Horowitz discusses these contradictions and the evolution of the Russian-Jewish dilemma that ensued. In this evolution, he points to Isaac Babel as a writer who retreated from Jewish politics, yet who paraded his Jewish identity. For Victor Peppard, Babel is an ironist, who puts a spotlight on violence to de-romanticize the Russian Revolution and to raise questions about men at war. In the short stories from Babel's collection, *Red Cavalry*, Peppard underscores the wavy line between violence and the duty of a soldier, between shooting at the enemy and taking a life, between brutish and heroic behavior. Drawing attention to these contrapuntal issues, Peppard argues that in Babel's short stories violence dehumanizes everyone, turning both perpetrators and the victims into automatons.

Julian Moss examines violence in the controversial prose of Viktor Astaf'ev (1924-2001) who was drawn to themes of war, ecology, Siberia and village life. In his war stories, Moss finds unvarnished depictions of combat and angry disclosures about the treatment of enlisted men. In what is called "village prose,"

Moss underscores Astaf'ev's criticism of Soviet policies (and lack of policies) that threatened rural Russia and the pristine wildness of Siberia. Astaf'ev, according to Moss, was widely criticized for his dark representations, especially in *A Sad Detective Story*, published under Gorbachev. For Moss, violence is Astaf'ev's principal evidence in his case against the Soviet system and the society it created.

Boris Lanin and Elena Vassileva discuss violence in regard to Russian anti-utopian works of fiction, which illuminate the faulty ideals and the social realities behind them. After pointing to several early Soviet anti-utopian novels, they provide a summary of *We* and *This is Moscow Speaking*. Updating the persistence of this genre of literature, they turn to recent literature such as *Selective Atomizing*, which contains a fictionalized account of the implementation of Vladimir Putin's notion of "dictatorship of the law." They also consider *The Lark*, *The Case of the Greedy Barbarian* and *The Angel's Bite*, concluding that some measure of violence is the price for sustaining new ideals such as legal cleanliness, a perfect penal system or a Eurasian empire.

In the literature of the 1980s and 1990s, Nadya Peterson claims that there is a strong connection between the death of characters and the crumbling of Soviet society. According to Peterson, the theme of death and its evocation of moral decay, futility and an atmosphere of doom is widespread. In her comparison of this theme in the fiction of Astaf'ev, Iurii Mamleev, Svetlana Vasileva and Elena Tarasova, she argues that there is a divide between male and female authors in, for example, attributing roles to women characters, e.g., Astaf'ev's and Mamleev's sacrificial women vs. Vasileva's androgynous woman and Tarasova's mad woman.

Several essays examine violence from the perspective of gender theory. Teresa Polowy provides an overview of the abuse of women in Russia from the Kievan era to the present, with emphasis upon further abuse in the post-Soviet period. She not only supports her argument about misogynistic attitudes with Church texts, household manuals, proverbs and secular literature, but also with recent statistics and reports from the Women's Crisis Center in Moscow, ANNA and UNICEF. She concludes by saying that in Russia the perception of violence against women as a problem rather than a given is still in its early stages. Gender theory shapes Tatyana Novikov's investigation of violence in Nina Sadur's fiction. She claims that through fantasy, magic and witchcraft Sadur's abused women are enabled to turn the tables on their tormentors. She stresses that these women do not wantonly turn to violence; they are driven to it. Straddling fantasy and reality, they give themselves over to plotting revenge. While victims and victimizers change places and violence begets violence, Novikov assures us that Sadur's principal aim is to turn gender paradigms upside down. Elizabeth Skomp compares the tenor of violence in Nina Sadur's *The South* and Svetlana Vasilenko's *Little Fool*. Both focus on variations of the passive female,

whose torments are the backdrop to a life-changing transformation. According to Skomp, the principal reason for their torments is their position as outsiders, which draws suspicion, avoidance and abuse from “normal” society. Yet through the trials of their unconscious journeys, Sadur’s and Vasilenko’s protagonists arrive at a new threshold: Olia is reborn with the help of pilgrims and Ganna becomes a martyr.

Natasha Kolchevska discusses the Gulag memoirs of Evgeniia Ginzburg and Evfrosiniia Kersnovskaia. After commenting on the general features of this type of memoir, she explains what these authors have in common. Above all, Kolchevska underscores how differently these authors construct themselves in their writing. According to Kolchevska, Ginzburg is “relational,” Kersnovskaia is “individuating.” For Kolchevska, the writing and the drawings that starkly capture Kersnovskaia’s Gulag experience are “masculine.” Rather than being a cultural mediator, like Ginzburg, she, in the opinion of Kolchevska, concentrates on providing a record of inhumanity. Anna Brodsky looks at the virulent kind of nationalism that has emerged in Russia since the fall of Communism, especially in regard to the Chechen war. Putting aside claims about the “top-down” propagation of nationalist ideology, she argues that we should not overlook what is being propagated “from the ground up” by participants in the Chechen war who make their memoirs available on the web. In two telling memoirs, she discusses the personal views of Russian soldiers about why they are fighting in Chechnya.

While eating is often depicted as a pleasurable pastime and an opportunity to socialize, in Russian literature Ronald Leblank often finds it associated with violence. To provide examples, he cites Dostoevsky, whose characters not only eat, but also devour like beasts, especially in *Notes from the House of the Dead*. He then discusses examples of alimentary violence at the turn of the century and during the Soviet period, pausing to cite many writers, including Boris Pyl’niak, Babel, Andrei Platonov, Iurii Olesha and Viktor Pelevin. In view of the psychological and philosophical associations of animalistic feeding, Leblank considers it no less than a code of power and a platform for domination. Mark Lipovetsky goes so far as to consider violence as necessary component of communication in the minimalist narratives of Daniil Kharms (1905-42), an absurdist who wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. Lipovetsky points out that, in *Incidents*, violence (e.g., death, beatings, dismemberments, humiliations) is a constant act, but it has no motivation. He explains that the radical reduction of all content to absurdist signifiers is in itself an act of violence, especially when much of what is described leads to death or destruction.

It must be said that these essays do not amount to a history or a measure of violence, but to independent studies of violence at very telling moments, by in large, from the last two centuries, with emphasis on the Soviet period. While these essays may be criticized for a lack of cohesion, they may not be criticized

for a lack of substance. The research behind them is impressive, reminding us that there is a difference between a report on violence and an analysis of the causes and effects of violence. Without exaggeration, these essays usher in the next phase of our investigation into the dark side of the human condition.

Walter F. Kolonosky  
*Kansas State University*