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Contents

Introduction
The Volume's Background and Outline

Felix Riefer

On 21 February 2022, the so-called "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk were recognized by Russia as sovereign states. Although President Vladimir Putin refused to declare war against Ukraine officially and has since continued to speak of a "special military operation,"[1] this diplomatic step was commonly understood as a declaration of war. According to Russia's official reports, exactly eight years before the recognition of the "People's Republics," the Russian Security Council made, during a meeting in Novo Ogarevo near Moscow, the decision to invade and occupy Ukraine's Crimea.[2]

In the following decade, the process of an ill-disguised landgrab took off starting with the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea on 18 March 2014. During that time, the Ukrainian South-East was under a systematic attempt of destabilization. Moreover, Russia's open departure from liberal democratic development became ever more aggressive and led into an ongoing worldwide disinformation campaign and new authoritarian alliances.

The European Parliament's Delegation to the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee reacted to the events unfolding starting 21 February 2022:

1 Mendras, M. (2024) *La Guerre Permanente: L'ultime stratégie du Kremlin*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy: 33–38.

2 Felgengauer, P. (2014) "Operatsiia̅ 'Russkii Krym'," *Novaia Gazeta*, 1 March, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/03/01/58559-operatsiya-171-russkiy-krym-187. However, the movement of Russian troops on and around Crimea had already started a day before this Security Council meeting, on 20 February 2014. See Kazdobina, J., Hedenskog J., Umland A. (2024) "Why the Russo-Ukrainian War Started Already in February 2014," *SCEEUS Report* 2, https://sceeus.se/en/publications/why-the-russo-ukrainian-war-started-already-in-february-2014/.

> "[…] Russian tanks entered the Eastern region of Ukraine commonly known as the Donbas. The region had long been controlled by Moscow and its proxies. Since 2014, over 700 thousand Russian passports have been distributed among a portion of the Donbas' population in preparation for—what is clear today—further aggression."[3]

Consequently, the new Russian aggression did not focus on the Donets Basin (Donbas) and Crimea only. On 24 February 2022, Russian military invaded Ukraine from three different directions: the North, South, and East. What some had called a "hybrid war" before turned into an open and full-scale war.

As of early summer 2025, this Russian aggression against its peaceful and democratizing neighbour had caused military casualties of estimated 130 000 Ukrainians and 200 000 Russians, and thousands of civilian fatalities; it has also displaced 9.5 million Ukrainians.[4]

Towns like Bucha,[5] Mariupol and Izyum have become synonyms for Russian war crimes, which include shelling civilian infrastructure such as hospitals or schools, torture, and sexual violence.[6]

For many European states, 24 February 2022 marked a turning point in history regarding their relations with Moscow—a *Zeitenwende* (change of times), as former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz phrased it.[7] While Germany had been particularly lenient towards the Kremlin for years, it has since 2022 become one of Kyiv's most

3 European Parliament (2024) "Statement of 22 February 2022 on the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent entities," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/fi/product/product-details/20220222DPU32262.

4 Russia Matters (2024) "The Russia-Ukraine War Report Card, June 18, 2024," Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, https://www.russiamatters.org/news/russia-ukraine-war-report-card/russia-ukraine-war-report-card-june-18-2024.

5 The New York Times (2022) "Their Final Moments: Victims of a Russian Atrocity in Bucha," 21 December, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/21/world/europe/bucha-ukraine-massacre-victims.html.

6 ODIHR—OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2024), official website, continued monitoring of "violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in Ukraine," https://www.osce.org/odihr/537287.

7 Die Bundesregierung (2022) "Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag," 27 February 2022 Berlin, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356.

weighty supporters. Before Russia's full-scale invasion started, many decision-makers did not understand properly the political meaning of the already then worrisome developments in Russia, Ukraine, and the other so-called post-Soviet states. Against this background, we suggest, in the two volumes of *Russia before the Full-Scale War*, to revisit selected papers published earlier mostly in ibidem Press's *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* edited by Julie Fedor in Melbourne, Australia, as well as *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte* (Forum for the Contemporary History and Ideas of Eastern Europe) edited by Leonid Luks in Eichstätt, Bavaria. The present Volume I focuses on Soviet and Russian elites, institutions, and society until 2021.

The first part of Volume I traces trajectories in Soviet times that cast their shadow into Russian post-Soviet development. The second part investigates key factors that help to explain the authoritarian anti-Western backlash and resurgence of imperial revisionism that are characteristic of today's Russia once again.

Natalia Samover opens the anthology with an analysis of "symmetrical gaps" in Soviet/Russian visual symbolism, focusing on the striking absence of an image of Liberty in Soviet visual discourse. Unlike Western traditions that celebrate liberty through iconic representations, the Soviet regime deliberately avoided such imagery, reflecting its ideological suppression of individual freedom. Yet, dissidents managed to reference and critique the regime using subversive visual strategies, even in the absence of an official symbol. Samover argues that these omissions were not accidental but formed part of a broader system of visual control, where absence itself became a powerful ideological and expressive tool.

Chris Monday explores the life and times of Mikhail Eliseevich Putin (1894–1969), a prominent figure in Stalin's modernization campaign and "socialist competition." He investigates the possibility that Mikhail Putin may have been related to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Acknowledging the heavy censorship surrounding Vladimir Putin's personal history, Monday pieces together circumstantial evidence to support the link. Drawing on this conclusion, Monday suggests that the potential family connection

between the current president and a celebrated Soviet figure merits serious consideration.

Simon Schlegel critically examines the Soviet deployment of ethnicity as an administrative category, highlighting the state's proclivity to conceptualize ethnic identities as static and primordial. This tendency, which he terms the "primordial trap," persisted despite substantial historical and ethnographic evidence pointing to the fluid and constructed nature of such identities. Schlegel demonstrates how Soviet ethnographers and administrators, although cognizant of these complexities, were compelled to reduce and codify ethnic categories to align with bureaucratic and ideological imperatives. He further investigates how this reductive practice was rationalized in light of its inherent contradictions and how the theoretical frameworks underpinning it evolved into pervasive and enduring assumptions within Soviet governance and scholarship.

Starting with Iurii Trifonov's novella *Another Life*, **Konstantin Kaminskij** explores how the figure of the *homo oeconomicus* emerged within the late Soviet intelligentsia, sparking the rise of economic *samizdat* in the 1980s. During this period, private property rights gradually became detached from the fundamental principle of universal human rights. Kaminskij argues that liberalism in Russia failed to confront this disconnection, leading to the disintegration of a consensus favoring liberal values in post-Soviet Russia. He uses the examples of the dissident oligarchs Boris Berezovskii and Mikhail Khodorkovskii as embodiments of this dissociated relationship between human rights and private ownership.

Leonid Luks closes the first section with a comparison of post-Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany, examining the structural parallels between them and highlighting the vulnerabilities that undermined both democratic experiments. He argues that the Russian democracy which emerged in August 1991 exhibited significant similarities to the Weimar Republic, including weak democratic traditions, fragmented political landscapes, and socio-economic instability. Luks explores how these conditions facilitated the rise of authoritarian tendencies in both contexts. By drawing historical comparisons, he emphasizes the cyclical nature of political regression

in societies lacking stable democratic institutions. His analysis contributes to understanding the fragility of democratization processes in transitional states that face systemic crises and identity conflicts.

The second part of the book begins with **Maria Snegovaya's** analysis of the roots of Russia's re-autocratization. Her approach attributes this development to a lack of elite circulation and the entrenchment of persistent formal as well as informal institutional structures. Snegovaya argues that these factors prevented the evolution of democratic practices, and concludes that democracy in Russia has never truly begun. The article further explores the consolidation of power under Vladimir Putin, when political, economic, and judicial institutions became subordinated to executive control. It highlights the manipulation of electoral processes and suppression of opposition, framing Russia's political trajectory from a "managed democracy" to today's entrenched authoritarianism with limited prospects for liberal reform.

Alexander J. Motyl's article argues that post-communist transformations were shaped not solely by elite policy choices but by pre-existing institutional conditions. Institutional legacies—combinations of totalitarian and imperial influences—produced three reform clusters:

- countries with minimal such legacies transitioned successfully to democracy and market systems;
- countries with strong such legacies lacked the institutional basis for transformation; and
- countries with mixed such legacies formed unstable hybrid regimes.

The institutional starting points constrained the pace and scope of change—a fact that highlights why institutions cannot be rapidly constructed. Ukraine's democratic movement and Russia's authoritarian turn illustrate these dynamics, which present significant challenges for the European Union's engagement in the region.

Felix Riefer's chapter investigates the role of Russian foreign policy think tanks—such as IMEMO, MGIMO, or RIAC—in shap-

ing Russia's international affairs. Using a qualitative-inductive approach based on open sources and interviews in Moscow, Riefer examines how these institutions function within Russia's centralized "power vertical." While foreign policy remains primarily directed by the President through the Presidential Administration, there is a growing recognition of the need for research-based analytical support. The paper explores how think tanks contribute to policy formulation through the generation of ideas, analysis, advocacy, and lobbying. It assesses their intellectual and institutional influence in a system where policymaking is tightly controlled and offers insights into the interplay between expertise and power in contemporary Russian foreign policy.

Håvard Bækken introduces the Russian Program of Patriotic Education developed within Russia's Ministry of Defense. Emerging under conditions of economic crisis and societal instability, the program aimed to counter youth delinquency and Western cultural influence by promoting military values and aesthetics. It not only sought to elevate military service but functioned also as a tool of traditionalist social outreach, framing soldiers as moral exemplars and custodians of Russian identity. The incorporation of the military into civilian nation-building efforts began before Putin took office and continues under his leadership, reflecting its crisis-driven foundational logic. Thus, highlighting the deep roots of the military within civilian matters and its role as an ideological backbone against the background of failed nation building in Russia.

Rolf Fredheim's analysis of Russian media's selection of Western reporting on Russia shows a biased, stereotype reaffirming practice. He examines how Kremlin-affiliated media distort Western reporting through selective translation, focusing on RIA Novosti's *InoSMI* and, to a lesser extent, RT's *InoTV*. He argues that filtered translations of Western press and television reports reaffirmed the Kremlin's distortion about the West for its mostly monolingual Russian audience. The first section highlights the contradiction that, while many observers have criticized the poor quality of *Ino-SMI*'s translations, some Russian researchers still use them to study Western discourse. The second section employs quantitative

analysis to assess which Western texts were translated or omitted during two key events of 2014—the pseudo-referendum on Crimea and the downing of flight MH17—revealing systematic editorial filtering.

Olenka Dmytryk's chapter closes Volume I with an account of gender and sexual dissent, examining contemporary Ukraine and Russia through the intersection of feminist art and activism. Her paper analyzes three feminist art projects—*Zhinochyi Tsekh* (Kyiv, 2012), *Feminist Pencil* (Moscow, 2012), and *Feminist Pencil-II* (Moscow, 2013)—and argues that they signify a shift in contemporary art towards explicit resistance against patriarchal norms and neo-traditionalist state politics. Dmytryk explores the curatorial approaches, artworks, and the transnational networks of dissent that both shaped and were shaped by these initiatives, highlighting how feminist artists actively challenged dominant sociopolitical narratives through creative, collective, and politically engaged artistic expression.

I

The Soviet Pre-History

She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named
A Note about the Soviet Dissident Bacronym "Sof'ia Vlas'evna"[1]

Natalia Samover

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this 'You-Know-Who' nonsense—for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: *Voldemort*."
J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

"[W]hat kind of secrecy can we talk about here, one wants to ask, when even the dumbest snitch trailing around after us knew what Sof'ia Vlas'evna meant?"
Irina Uvarova-Daniel', *Daniel' i vse vse vse*

"'Cripes but you're strong, Soviet power!' said the *muzhik*—and burst into tears." This old Soviet joke is a good place to begin the tale of our heroine. Had our *muzhik* found it within him to smile, even mournfully, he might have put it differently: "Ah, Sof'ia Vlas'evna, you're something else!..."

The phrase "Sof'ia Vlas'evna," a playful code-name for the Soviet regime *(sovetskaia vlast')* has long since passed out of active usage; like the object it signified, however, it is still remembered, and still comes up in conversation. Twentieth-century spoken Russian was rich in phrases of this kind, in which significant phenomena were given personalized form. Political examples include the phrase "Vera Mikhailovna" for capital punishment (VM, from *vysshaia mera [nakazaniia])* and "Galina Borisovna" for the secret police (GB, from *gosbezopasnost'*). The slang once used by consumers of alcohol surrogates included such phrases as "Polina Ivanovna" (*politura* – a type of varnish containing alcohol, and a component of the "Balsam of Canaan" featured in Venedikt Yerofeev's *Moskva–Petushki*); and "Boris Fedorovich" (a reference to the "BF" glue used

1 The chapter was first published in 2017 in the *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 3(2): 87–111. The author is grateful to Aleksandr Daniel', Oleg Lekmanov, Aleksandr Ospovat, and Andrei Nemzer, for valuable observations expressed in conversations about this article.

by Soviet moonshiners for the distillation of alcohol)—to give just a couple of examples.

The lexicological term for word play of this kind is "backronym" or "bacronym." It usually comprises a humorous "decoding" of a real or putative (in fact nonexistent) acronym or other abbreviation. In the case of Sof'ia Vlas'evna, however, things are rather more complicated. While the Soviet communist party willingly answered to the abbreviations "RSDRP," "RKP(b)," "VKP(b)" and "KPSS,"[2] the Soviet regime never deigned to allow itself to be rendered simply "SV" in official discourse. And yet it proved unable to prevent the natural tendency of language towards simplifying unwieldy formulations. The term *sovvlast'*, now half-forgotten, evidently served as the prototype for "Sof'ia Vlas'evna."

It is not possible to establish the precise time and date of Sof'ia Vlas'evna's birth. Most likely this backronym emerged some time from the late 1950s onwards—probably after the 20th Party Congress, which gave a mighty impetus to public reflection on the theme of the country's political system. By this time, the shorthand term *sovvlast'* had already undergone something of an evolution. The term was quite common in spoken language in the early post-revolutionary period and the 1920s. It can be found both in the writings of Lenin, and in proclamations issued by anti-Soviet peasant movements. In the interwar period it did not have any value-laden connotations, and at this stage it was still a perfectly neutral term designating the political system, by no means indicating any particular attitude towards that system on the part of the speaker. But by the 1950s the frequency of use of the term *sovvlast'* decreased noticeably, and its place in official discourse was taken over by the longer form, *sovetskaia vlast'*. Evidently it was precisely during this period that this linguistic freak, one of the peculiar products of Soviet *novoiaz*, began to acquire a distinctive negative hue. Once part

2 That is, the various names of the party in its different incarnations: the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP, 1898–1917); the Russian Communist Party (of the Bolsheviks) (RKP(b), 1918–1925); the Union-wide Communist Party (of the Bolsheviks) (VKP(b), 1925–1952), and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSS, 1952–1991).

of the broader conventional lexicon, the term *sovvlast'* gradually migrated into the speech of the dissatisfied, where it became used in order to underline the hopelessly outdated and primitive nature of the political culture associated with the Soviet regime.

But even after it had acquired these negative connotations, *sovvlast'* continued to remain a political term which, even though it was gradually falling out of use, was still formally entirely legitimate. Meanwhile, from the late 1950s, a process gathered momentum whereby civic consciousness was being liberated from state regulation, and then also from communist ideology; and this liberation of consciousness demanded new linguistic means for its expression. The transformation of *sovvlast'* into *Sof'ia Vlas'evna* made it possible to play a quite courageous verbal game, raising the stakes of expressing a critical attitude towards the regime by shifting the tone from one of irony to frank sarcasm.

There is a perfectly logical reason why it is not possible to date the first uses of the *Sof'ia Vlas'evna* backronym: it was used exclusively in spoken language. We do not know who invented it, but it is reasonable to assume that this must have been one of the writers or poets of the Thaw—someone with a wordsmith's perfect pitch. Even more importantly, this must have been someone who was sufficiently alienated from Soviet power as to be capable of ridiculing it. Clearly, this must have been a young person. For the older generation, the generation that had grown up in the 1930s and lived through the Stalinist terror, Soviet power was no laughing matter. The Soviet regime, its political nature and the role that it played in the fate of the country and the people, was a deeply serious and painful problem. It is no coincidence that neither Solzhenitsyn, nor Shalamov, nor any of their peers, is on record as having referred to the Soviet regime as Sof'ia Vlas'evna.

In the 1960s, however, this cutting euphemism was already "very well known in narrow circles"—that is, for the intelligentsia, with its critical orientation towards the regime, it became one of the passwords that made it possible to identify an interlocutor as "one

of us."[3] During the same period, one also comes across instances of a similar decoding of the initials of Soviet power, in the form "Sof'ia Vasil'evna." This version failed to take root, because it proved less successful from the phonetic viewpoint and because it lacked the semantic richness of Sofia Vlas'evna (to be explored below).

It was only after the backronym Sof'ia Vlas'evna had become firmly entrenched in spoken language that it migrated into literature. In the mid-1970s the phrase appeared on paper, in Yurii Aleshkovskii's *povest' Kenguru,* moreover in an even more compressed variation: "I think that with time, there's a lot of things that this vile Son'ka, our Soviet power, is going to choke on. It can't fail to be otherwise. After all she's sucked a painfully huge number of people's blood without the slightest provocation or reason, she's tormented innocent souls, and drained their strength, and for half a century she's been keeping the human spirit in a state of endless humiliation." Moreover, the author himself, in an appendix to the *povest'* entitled "A Brief Phenomenological Phrasebook," categorizes this term for Soviet power as an instance of "popular slang" *(vsenarodnyi zhargon)*.[4] Later, at the very end of the 1970s, a certain "Stepanida Vlas'evna" also makes a cameo appearance in Vasilii Aksenov's novel *Ostrov Krym*.[5]

These variations should not be read as attempts to introduce an alternative version of the backronym. Rather, they testify to just how well established the backronym now was, to the point where

3 See Vail', P. and Genis', A. (1998) observation that: "The specificity of Soviet life fostered the emergence of a grandiose Aesopian system. Almost any concept, name, or phenomenon could be given an Aesopian pseudonym … In the 1960s the poetics of the Aesopian language created its own meta-world. This Aesopian language gradually became decoupled from the empirical reality that had given rise to it … The growing complexity of the Aesopian system in the '60s did not increase the amount of truth smuggled past the censors, but it enriched this truth, transforming it into art," in *60-e. Mir sovetskogo cheloveka*, Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie: 166.

4 Aleshkovskii, Yu. (1985) *Kenguru*, Middletown, CT: Pisatel'-izdatel': 164, 166. Aleshkovskii completed the *povest'* in 1975, and it circulated in *samizdat* for a decade until its first publication in the West. These fragments of text do not appear in later Russian editions.

5 Aksenov, V. (1979) *Ostrov Krym*, Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis Publishing: 88. Aksenov completed work on the novel in 1979.

writers could be play with it, confident that the reader would nevertheless recognize the allusion to Sof'ia Vlas'evna/Soviet power. By replacing Sof'ia, an "urban," "intelligentsia" name, with Stepanida, a name usually found among "simple folk" in the "village," and combining it with a patronymic to match, Aksenov evidently intended to emphasize the Soviet regime's connection to the most ignorant strata of the population. Aleshkovskii's variation can be read in a similar way. Dropping the patronymic and adopting the familiar "Son'ka" suggests an attitude of utter contempt and disdain, and a complete absence of fear in the face of the regime.

These literary games were later continued by Andrei Bitov. In the late 1990s, he made revisions to his novel *Pushkinskii dom*, the first version of which had been completed in 1971, and added a reference to "a certain Sof'ia Vladimirovna," who is cursed by one of the novel's characters, "Uncle Dickens" *("diadia Dikkens")*, a veteran of the Stalinist camps.[6] This change of the patronymic form from "Vlas'evna" to "Vladimirovna" was an allusion to the Soviet regime's founding father, Vladimir Lenin.

Sof'ia Vlas'evna's patronymic is in fact of particular interest. While at one level this was an arbitrary choice based on simple consonance *(vlast'/Vlas),* a closer examination also reveals unexpected cultural depths. Thus, in the patronymic Vlas'evna, standing behind some unknown Vlas—Sof'ia's father—we might discern Saint Vlasii, "god of cattle," who once stood in for the pagan Veles (Volos) in the peasant pantheon on the very same phonetic principle, just as Sof'ia Vlas'evna stood in for *sovetskaia vlast'*. Hence in Russian folklore the cow is *Vlas'evna,* and the household's cattle collectively is *Vlas'ev rod*.[7] A subtle linguistic intuition was at work in giving "Son'ka" her patronymic; it not only pointed to her peasant roots, but also unexpectedly illuminated the historical archaic dimension with which her image was suffused.

6 Bitov, A. (1999) *Pushkinskii dom*, St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha: 48.

7 On which see Uspenskii, B. A. (1982) *Filologicheskie razyskaniia v oblasti slavianskikh drevnostei: (Relikty iazychestva v vostochnoslav. kul'te Nikolaia Mirlikiiskogo)*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta: 127–128.

Additional resonances were certainly added by the patronymic's closeness to the surname of the chief characters of Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*, the Vlasovye: the "conscious" worker Pavel, champion of the proletariat, and his mother Pelageia—a simple, uneducated woman who gradually arrives at an understanding of the revolutionary ideas held by her son. An emblematic work of socialist realism, Gorky's novel entered the Soviet school curriculum and was twice adapted for the screen, in 1926 (dir. V. Pudovkin) and again in 1955 (dir. M. Donskoi). The names of its main characters were household names for most Soviet people. Re-applied to the figure of Sof'ia Vlas'evna, the heroic-revolutionary associations linked to Gorky's novel, and indeed the whole aesthetic of *sotsrealizm* more broadly, were subjected to an ironic reinterpretation.

No matter how successful this backronym, however, had it been merely the fruit of spoken wordplay, it is unlikely that it would ever have been more than just another shortlived "meme," of the kind that come and go in such abundance in the process of public reflection. But right from the outset, Sof'ia Vlas'evna was no mere "meme"; on the contrary, this was an image that carried the accumulated historical experience of two generations—the experience of life under Soviet power.

Among the epithets with which the Soviet regime was crowned from the interwar period onwards, the most stable was *rodnaia*, an untranslatable term denoting kinship and affection. Entering in this way into the Soviet person's most intimate family circle, state power found itself perceived effectively as it had been by the peasant family for centuries: as a species of petty domestic evil spirits *(nechist')*. One had to know how to build relations with "our *rodnaia* Soviet power," just as one did with a *domovoi* (house-spirit) or *ovinnik* (the spirit dwelling in the threshing house). Accompanying the human being from birth through to death, harshly regulating his social life, interfering in his domestic everyday existence, Soviet power could be a benevolent helper-spirit; once roused to anger, however, she was equally capable of bringing destruction

and even death to the disobedient.[8] The art of reaching a modus vivendi with Soviet power became a key social skill enabling the survival and wellbeing of the people forced to co-exist with it.

In the post-war decades, the regime's totalitarian pressure on society began to weaken. It became increasingly possible for people to find spheres of life in which they might exist and operate, if not completely independently of the state, then at least with only minimal contact with the state. Consequently, Soviet power began to lose its basic qualities of magical omnipresence and omnipotence. And just as the helper-spirits of paganism were re-invented after Christianization and transformed into evil spirits which nevertheless retained their significance in human life, so too was *sovvlast'*, now perceived as something separate and external, transformed in people's consciousness from "our *rodnaia sovetskaia vlast'*" into a malevolent witch-like figure by the name of Sof'ia Vlas'evna.

In her memoir of the 1970s entitled *Daniel' i vse vse vse*, Irina Uvarova-Daniel', the spouse of dissident writer Yulii Daniel', provides an eloquent description of Sof'ia Vlas'evna as an alien, hostile, and most importantly, a deeply personalized entity:

> She was a revolting old woman, that SV, and a nasty one to boot. We hated her. We made fun of her. We played tricks on her. We didn't fear her; we even ignored her. But our lives revolved around her, and there was nothing that could be done about it. She occupied a huge place in a space that was also huge—a flabby monster; and "barking," as Radishchev put it; he knew a thing or two about monsters. But we were present in that space too, we had official registration papers in her space, and that irritated her. [And it irritated] us too.[9]

8 For an example of the symbolic insertion of the regime and its leaders into everyday life, see Laktioniv, A. I. (1952) *Pereezd na novuiu͡ kvartiru*, available at http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/year-of-laktionov/year-of-laktionov-images/#bwg133/757. The leader's portrait has been inserted into this collective portrait of a family, part of a happy moment in the family's life, when a mother and her children move into a new apartment provided to them by the Soviet regime.

9 Uvarova, I. P. (2014) *Daniel' i vse vse vse*, St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha: 5–6. Uvarova refers here to the famous epigraph to Aleksandr Radishchev's (1790) *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*, with its characterization of the Russian Empire as a Beast, "enormous, disgusting, a-hundred maws and barking."

In fact, if one views Sof'ia Vlas'evna as a post-folklore figure, a creation of the educated imagination, then one must admit that she did possess something approaching the defined features of a personality and a biography. She could perhaps have described herself as the heroine of the 1939 Soviet film *A Member of the Government* did: "A simple Russian *baba*, beaten by her husband, frightened by the *popy* [a colloquial term for "priests"], shot at by enemies, a survivor." Born at a time when the Soviet regime was no longer young by human reckoning, she was born into the world as an old woman—spiteful, petty, stupid, and vengeful, filled with hatred for everything new, alive, and spontaneous, for anything that bore the imprint of creative freedom. A rather unpleasant and dangerous character, on the whole.

But if the contours of Sof'ia Vlas'evna's character were drawn quite clearly, her physical appearance was utterly indeterminate. And she inherited this "non-visuality" from her maternal image: from Soviet power itself. The politicized orthography of the time required that *Sovetskaia vlast'* be written with a capital letter, which made the phrase resemble a proper noun, but even at the peak of its might *sovvlast'* never was furnished with its own visual image. It was everywhere; it penetrated all social relations from top to bottom—and it was simply not possible to combine it with any definite corporeal form. At the same time, Soviet power could have laid claim to the central place in the symbolic system of Soviet propaganda, given the absence within that system of a persona embodying the country as a whole.

Prior to the revolution, it was the conservative Mother-Russia *(Rossiia-matushka)* that fulfilled the role of such an image, but this image was a long time in the making. The perception of Russia as a woman, as the mother of all Russians, became a commonplace in Russian literature in the early 19th century,[10] but for a long period, the numerous allegorical figures through which Russia was embodied in the art of the 18th-early 19th century, had laid no claim to

10 Thus, Davydov, D. (1815) in his poem *Pesniâ* exclaims: "I'm glad to fight the devil for you, / Our mother Russia!" ("Za tebiâ na cherta rad, / Nasha matushka Rossiiâ!").

being transformed into the permanent personification of the country.

It was only in the second half of the 19th century that a stable visual image of Mother-Russia took shape;[11] moreover, at this point, it existed in several different versions. The monument marking Russia's millennium that was erected in 1862 in Novgorod and designed by Mikhail Mikeshin was crowned by a female figure in vaguely folk costume, kneeling before an allegorical depiction of Faith *(Vera)*. Later Russia was often depicted in the form of a magnificent woman in royal robes and wearing the cap of Monomakh (the ancient crown of the Russian monarchs). But the most famous, classical image of autocratic Russia was the small cast-iron sculpture produced by Nikolai Laveretskii in 1896.[12] This Russia—young and war-like, closer to Joan of Arc than to anybody's mother—proved extremely useful during World War I.[13]

The revolutionary changes that followed soon after brought not simply a renewal of the stock of political symbols. The new symbolic system differed fundamentally from its predecessor in that for the first decades of its existence it managed to get by perfectly well without any central figure like "Mother-Russia." Depictions of the real-life *vozhd'*—of Lenin, and then Stalin—served a different end: they personified not a country, but an ideology. Anticipation of the coming world revolution meant that the traditional geopolitical identity, attached to a stable territory and to the country's historically designated name, gave way to an ideological identity—territorially undefined, inclined to designate itself not by reference to a particular object, but descriptively, as a kind of "land of the Soviets." Unlike the short-lived designation "Russian Republic" *(Rossiiskaia Respublika)*, which still carried within it a connection to the historical subject known as "Rossiia," the official title "Union of

11 For more detail see Riabov, O. V. (2008) "«Rossiiā-Matushka»: Istoriiā vizualizatsii," *«Granitsy» al'manakh TSentra ėtnicheskikh i natsional'nykh issledovanii* 2: 7–36; and Riabov, O. V. (2014) "«Rodina-Mat'» v istorii vizual'noi kul'tury Rossii," *Vestnik Tverskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 1: 95.

12 See Laveretskii, N. A. (1896) *Rossiiā*, available at http://www.bronzoviyvek.ru/htm/russia.html.

13 See Unknown artist (1914) *Rossiiā—za pravdu*, poster, available at http://www.plakaty.ru/plakaty/voennye/rossiya_za_pravdu/.

Soviet Socialist Republics" emphasized the rupture with all state traditions and a fundamental readiness for endless expansion by absorbing any territorial formations that accepted Soviet ideology. This conceptual facelessness meant that no male persona by the name of *Sovetskii Soiuz* (the Soviet Union, grammatically gendered as masculine in the Russian) ever took shape, while in place of Russia as a unified female image there now appeared a whole bevy of "sister-republics," whose names were most often grammatically feminine: Armenia, Bashkiria, Belorussia, Georgia, Karelia, Kirgiziia… Later, in the 1950s, they would adorn the famous "Friendship of the Peoples" fountain in the grounds of the Moscow Exhibition of Economic Achievements (VDNKh) (Image 1).

Image 1. "Friendship of the Peoples" fountain, Moscow, constructed 1954. Photo by Natalia Samover.

In the works of Western interwar caricaturists it was often a purely ideological figure, Bolshevism, that served as the personification of the Soviet Union as a world power. Bolshevism was depicted as a wild and terrifying giant of a person. In the German satirical journal

Simplicissimus from 7 October 1934, for example, Bolshevism is represented as a monster holding France (Marianne) in his lap.[14] Dissatisfaction over the Nazi government's growing rapprochement with the USSR and France led the appearance in this journal of several caricatures on the same theme, and on 20 October 1935 *Simplicissimus* published a drawing by Erich Schilling,[15] featuring the same composition, but with the roles reversed: French Minister of State Édouard Herriot is depicted here in the role of Marianne, and he is perched on the lap of a nightmarish creature of female gender, dressed in a military tunic and wearing a Soviet pointed *Budenovka* cap on her head. However, this figure, of course, represents neither Russia nor Soviet power, and certainly not Sof'ia Vlas'evna—instead, this is merely "Bolshevism" in female form.

Meanwhile, the more the illusion of impending world revolution dissolved, and the more clear the geopolitical ambitions of Stalin's USSR became, the more urgent became the need to fill this lacuna in the system of visual imagery employed by Soviet state propaganda. The image of the *vozhd'* alone was insufficient for embodying the might and glory of a country which, while continuing as previously to set a firm course for the communist future, had now begun to remember its past and refer back to its historical heritage. In Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film *Aleksandr Nevskii* we even glimpse a brief re-appearance of Laveretskii's "Rossiia" in the form of a secondary character, Vasilisa, the mighty warrior-maiden (Image 2). But a simple restoration of the pre-revolutionary image was out of the question, of course. Something different was required …

14 See Unknown artist (1934) "Tell me, Marianne…," *Simplicissimus*, 7 October, available at http://www.simplicissimus.info/index.php?id=6&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Bvolume%5D=37&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Baction%5D=showVol-ume&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=YearRegister&cHash=ad94c8bd62a339055862e84a08c447af.

15 See Schilling, E. (1935) "Annäherung um jeden Preis," *Simplicissimus*, 20 October, available at http://www.simplicissimus.info/index.php?id=6&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5BissueId%5D=1985&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Baction%5D=showIssuePag-es&tx_lombkswjournaldb_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=YearRegister&cHash=23db478a2880d0d6dc18e419ed7c5279.

Image 2. Frame from S. M. Eisenstein's film *Aleksandr Nevskii* (1938).

It was the beginning of the Great Patriotic War that enabled the female figure's triumphant return to the repertoire of state visual propaganda. The clichés developed back in World War I now became relevant once more. But in the new conditions, the place of "Rossiia-matushka" was now occupied by a different figure: "Rodina-mat'" (Motherland-Mother).[16] She differed from her predecessor not only in her costume; with the loss of the historical name "Rossiia," the country's personification was left deprived of a proper name.

The image of Rodina-mat' was immediately elevated to a position equal in significance to the image of the *vozhd'*. We find the two paired together both in the classic wartime slogan "For the Motherland, for Stalin!" and in the lyrics of a song from the 1944 film *At Six in the Evening after the War*, based on a poem by Viktor

16 See Toidze, I. M. (1941) *Rodina-mat' zovet!* Poster, available at http://www.plakaty.ru/plakaty/voennye/rodina_mat_zovet/; and also Toidze, I. M. (1943) poster *Za Rodinu-mat'!,* available at http://www.plakaty.ru/plakaty/voennye/rodina_mat_zovet/.

Gusev: "Artillerymen, Stalin has given an order! Artillerymen, the Motherland is calling us!"

The war ended, Stalin's cult of personality was condemned, but the image of *Rodina-mat'* was firmly entrenched in Soviet visual discourse.[17] The figure of Sof'ia Vlas'evna was the dissidents' ironic response precisely to this endlessly reproduced image with all its unwomanly barrenness and severity.

And yet for all her flaws, Sof'ia Vlas'evna had one quality that imbued hope. Her age! Her very decrepitude was a kind of paradoxical symbol of the inevitability of social change. The same anticipation of change was reflected in this subversive Brezhnev-era *chastushka*, playing on the tiresome formulas of official discourse:

> The blue ball spins and twirls,
> It spins and twirls over our heads,
> Spinning, twirling, it wants to fall,
> Our *rodnaia sovetskaia vlast'!*
> *Krutitsia-vertitsia shar goluboi,*
> *Krutitsia-vertitsia nad golovoi,*
> *Krutitsia-vertitsia, khochet upast'*
> *Nasha rodnaia sovetskaia vlast'!*[18]

Let's quote Irina Uvarova-Daniel' once more:

> —Hey, but what if Sof'ia Vlas'evna kicks the bucket, what then?
> —Everything will be fine! Don't you doubt it!
> And indeed, nobody had any doubt of this.[19]

Any account of Sof'ia Vlas'evna would be incomplete, however, without making to another symbolic feminine image whose antipode she would have been, had this image existed in Soviet culture

17 See Ivanov, K. K. (1952) *Miru–mir!*, poster, available at http://www.plakaty.ru/plakaty/sotsialnye/miru_mir496/. Other famous examples include Vuchetich, Ye. V. (1959–67) *Rodina-mat'*, statue, Volgograd, available at: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Родина-мать_(Волгоград). See also Koretskii, V. B. (1975) *Net–fashizmu!*, available at: http://www.plakaty.ru/plakaty/sotsialnye/net_fashizmu/.

18 The first three lines of the *chastushka* are a borrowing from a pre-revolutionary *estrada* song which was in turn associated with the hero of the historical-revolutionary film *Maksim's Youth* (1934). The unexpected substitution of the final line lent the whole *chastushka* an anti-Soviet thrust.

19 Uvarova-Daniel', *Daniel'*, 5.

of the time: the image of Liberty. The most powerful modern tradition of depicting Liberty was formed by French culture. The baton was passed from the actresses who played the role of Goddess of Liberty in the public festivals of the Great French Revolution; to Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People," a response to the 1830 revolution; and, finally, to Marianne dressed in her cap of liberty—the symbol of the French Republic to this day. The migration of this image across the ocean was enabled by the colossal Statue of "Liberty, Enlightening the World" by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, and presented by France as a gift to the United States. It was unveiled in New York in 1886. In our time the Statue of Liberty is an unofficial national symbol of the United States, just as nameless as the Soviet Mother-Motherland—and just as ideologized.

There was one attempt made at breaking with the tradition of depicting Liberty in female form, with the erection of the July Column on Bastille Square in Paris in 1840. The column was crowned with a gold-plated figure of the Genius of Liberty in the form of a winged nude youth, the work of Auguste Dumont (Image 3). This monument was built in memory of the bourgeois revolution of July 1830, the same one that had inspired Delacroix; but the renunciation of the female figure of Liberty was linked to the July monarchy's desire to distance itself from the radical revolutionary symbolism of the earlier period.

Image 3. Auguste Dumont, The Genius of Liberty, Paris, 1840. Vassil/Public Domain. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

While the allegory of Liberty was taking shape in Europe, in Russia, attempts were being made to avoiding wherever possibly using the very word, loaded as it was with political connotations entirely incompatible with autocracy. It was only in the narrow context of the emancipation of the serfs that it became admissible to use the term freely after 1861. Even in this limited sphere, however, a national allegory of Liberty failed to take shape; her place was taken instead by the image of a real person: the Tsar-Liberator Alexander II.[20]

As a result, Russian artists were caught unawares by the onset of the revolutionary epoch. They had no ready-made repertoire of images for communicating the idea of liberty at their disposal, and their first attempts at creating such an image took them into territory very far from the classical "lady of Liberty" symbolism.

Scholars have long noted that the allegories of the first decades of Soviet power were almost exclusively masculine.[21] It is precisely

20 See Chizhov, M. A. and Volnukhin, S. M. (1913) *Monument to Emperor Alexander II*, Saratov, available at http://oldsaratov.ru/photo/15533. The inscription reads "To the Tsar'-Liberator. Saratov." For another example, see Opekushin, A. M. (1913) *Monument to Emperor Alexander II*, Novgorod, available at: http://110vtap.ucoz.ru/publ/ju_markitanov_otkrytie_v_novgorode_pamjatnika_imperatoru_aleksandru_ii/1-1-0-68.

21 See Waters, E. (1991) "The Female Form in Soviet Political Iconography (1917–1932)," in Clements, B. E., Engel, B. A. and Worobec, C. D. (eds.) *Russia's Women:*

a masculine image, symbolizing not so much liberty itself as the liberated, emancipated human being, as in Aristarkh Lentulov's work *Peace, Triumph, Liberation*, painted shortly after the February Revolution (Image 4).

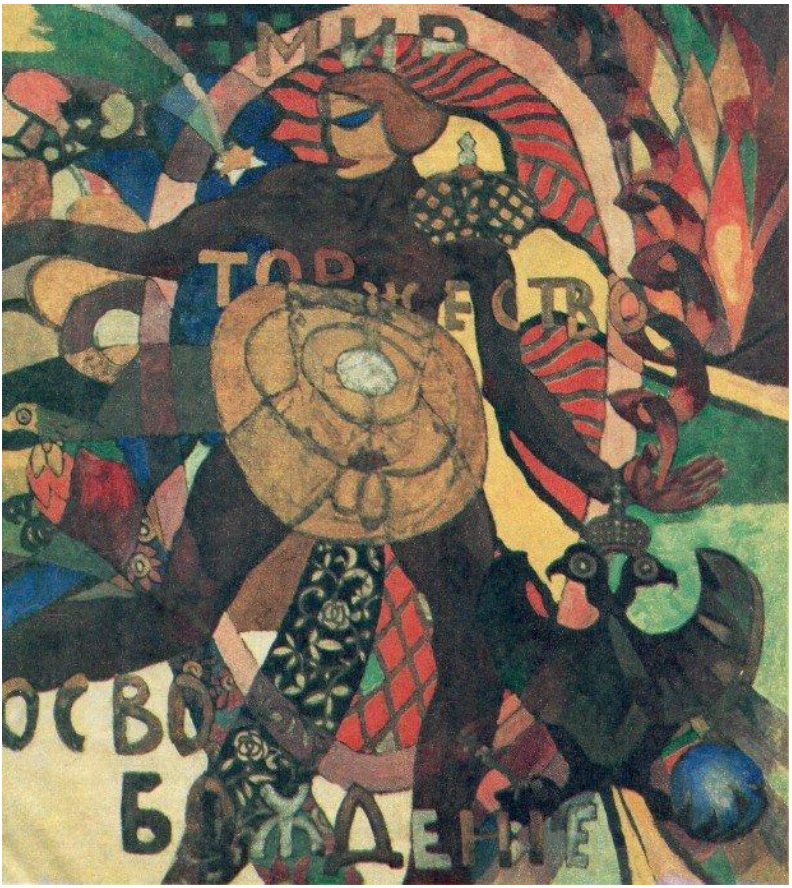

Image 4. Lentulov, A. V. (1917) Mir, torzhestvo, osvobozhdenie. Image source: https://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=160340.

Male figures invariably also occupied a central place in monuments erected in honor of abstract concepts. Many such monuments were

Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press: 227; and Naiman, E. (1997) *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet* Ideology, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 71.

produced in the early 1920s. Thus, Sergei Merkurov's 1913 sculpture depicting an old-man-thinker was transformed in late 1919 into the city monument "Thought," which was located on Tsvetnoi bul'var in Moscow until 1936. For a brief period (from 1922 to 1924), Fridrikh Lekht's gigantic "Worker" statue stood on Red Square. During the same period monuments to "Liberated Labor" were erected in Petrograd, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, and Cheliabinsk. The first two of these were colossal statues of male nudes, while the others depicted male worker-blacksmiths.

Soviet art produced no independent female allegories of this scale or significance during the period; nor did the appearance of Mukhina's "Worker and Peasant" couple in 1937 usher in a break in the tendency for the main values of Soviet society to be embodied in the form of masculine images. The apogee of this tendency was displayed to the world at the New York World's Fair in 1939. Atop the sixty-meter-high pylon rising above the Soviet pavilion was mounted Viacheslav Andreev's twenty-four-meter-high statue of the "New Soviet Man"—a gigantic stainless steel figure of a male worker holding aloft a ruby Kremlin star (Image 5). This statue symbolized the dictatorship of the proletariat—the foundation of the Soviet political system and, without doubt, "our answer to the Statue of Liberty." But what about the star? In this composition, the star can perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to depict the undepictable: Soviet power itself, an entity for which no visual embodiment ever was found.

Image 5. Stamp of the USSR 1939: USSR Pavilion.
USSR Post/Public Domain. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

But Soviet art did nevertheless possess its own Statue of Liberty in the European spirit. This was the work of another Andreev: Nikolai, the elder and much more gifted representative of the family of sculptors. From 1919 this statue adorned the obelisk of the Soviet Constitution on Sovetskaia Square in Moscow, an obelisk better known, thanks to her, as the Obelisk of Liberty.[22] The fate of this mighty image proved to be a sad one. Very soon after the creation of this monument, the development of the country's political system made the idea embodied in the monument an anachronism. The word "liberty," while not formally banned, nevertheless disappeared from public discourse once more, and was preserved only in the form of an antithesis to "enslavement" and "exploitation." Under the proletarian dictatorship, liberty in the political sense of the word could not be included amongst the basic values. Consequently, no tradition of the allegorical depiction of Liberty developed.

The logical end to the existence of the visual representation of Soviet Liberty came on the night of 21 April 1941, when the Obelisk of the Soviet Constitution in Moscow was dismantled on the pretext that it had fallen into disrepair. There is no recorded public reaction to this event. Thus did the only Soviet Statue of Liberty meet her fate, her demise proving no less symbolic than her creation.[23]

The posthumous fate of this monument proved to be equally symbolic. The idea of restoring the statue came to Nikita Khrushchev after his visit to the United States. In 1962 a resolution was passed by the party's Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers "On Restoring the Monument to Liberty on Sovetskaia Square by 7 November 1964." But the Khrushchev Thaw was already coming to an end, its political potential depleted; a new "frost" was setting in, and in this new-old political reality the concept of liberty once again proved inconvenient. In October 1964

22 For images, see Wikimedia Commons (2017) *Category: Obelisk of Freedom,* https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Obelisk_of_Freedom.

23 The head of N. A. Andreev's "Liberty" has survived and is located in the Tret'iakov gallery in Moscow. For an image, see Photoshare.ru (2017), http://photoshare.ru/photo2427485.html.

Khrushchev himself was forced into early retirement by a conspiracy among his closest comrades, and his idea left with him.

The only official sphere in which the word "liberty" continued to function smoothly in the Soviet era was that of toponymy. To this day references to liberty have been preserved in a series of rural and urban toponyms in Russia and other former Soviet countries. Most of these were renamed or created during the early Soviet period. They include the hamlets and villages of Svoboda and Svobodnyi in the Volgograd, Voronezh, Kursk, Rostov, and Saratov oblasts and in Krasnodar and Stavropol' krais in Russia; Svoboda Squares in the Russian towns of Barnaul, Valdai, Vladikavkaz, Glazov, Kazan', in the Abkhazian capital Sukhumi and in the Belarusian cities of Minsk and Vitebsk; Svoboda Avenues in the Ukrainian cities of Kyiv and Dnipro (until recently Dnepropetrovsk); Svobodnyi Avenue in Moscow; and Svoboda Streets in the Russian cities of Moscow, Petersburg, Riazan', Kirov, Samara, Yaroslavl', and elsewhere.

Curiously, however, to this day, the concept of liberty, which gave way to totalitarian ideologemes in the pre-World War II period, has yet to return to the symbolic repertoire of Russian culture. The renaming of public places in honor of Liberty has been an important event in the recent history and culture of other post-Soviet states, from Ukraine, to Georgia, or Armenia—but not Russia.[24]

Let's return, however, to Sof'ia Vlas'evna. In the fantastic landscape of Soviet symbolic discourse, shot through with gaps and strange substitutions, this image played the role of a shadow, whose appearance testified to the coming twilight. Her age proved a brief one, and her end inglorious. At the peak of her power she was menacing and dangerous as the personification of the regime and its violence; she represented She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. But as her power dwindled, she came to be replaced by a different euphemism, and one that was, moreover, masculine in gender: *sovok* (an abbreviated term for the Soviet Union). This term appeared at a time when the social system and everyday life of the late USSR

24 The former Dzerzhinskii, Lenin and Theatre Squares in Khar'kov, Tbilisi, and Yerevan respectively have all been renamed Liberty Square.

(including also the Soviet regime itself) had become the object of mass contempt and alienation.[25]

And it was only towards the very end of the historical existence of the Soviet regime, during the perestroika years, that a visual image befitting of Sof'ia Vlas'evna was finally born. This was the ironic poster produced by Aleksandr Faldin and Rashid Akmanov, *Happy Birthday, Komsomol!* (1988),[26] in which the communist youth organization is unexpectedly represented by an image of an old woman, evidently a coeval of the Komsomol, which was created in 1918.

This might be a suitable place to draw our story to a close, were it not for the fact that, although Sof'ia Vlas'evna's name has disappeared from spoken language today, her image has proved to be unexpectedly enduring. Deeply rooted in the psychic experiences of several generations, the reflection of a phenomenon that has left an indelible imprint on Russian history, her image has outgrown the sphere of everyday wisecracks and wordplay—it has become a symbol capable of independent existence in its own right.

Everybody recognized her immediately when she made her appearance in 2008 in Dmitrii Krymov's play *Opus No.* 7, staged by the Moscow School of Dramatic Art Theater. The play featured a massive "Stepmotherland" figure—a spiteful middle-aged woman, sometimes dressed in a state security peaked cap with its blue band, sometimes in a frumpy flowery dress, pursuing and tormenting the composer Dmitrii Shostakovich.[27] Likewise, it is Sof'ia Vlas'evna's features, as the terrifying antithesis of Anna Akhmatova, that can be discerned in Mikhail Shemiakin's "Metaphysical Sphinxes" (Images 6–7) erected in 1995 on Robespierre Embankment in St Petersburg, opposite the sadly notorious "Kresty" prison, as a monument to the victims of political repression.[28]

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25 See Vorotnikov, Yu. L. (2010) "'Sovok' vchera, segodnia... zavtra? (Iz iazykovoĭ zhizni odnoĭ metafory)," *Voprosy filologii* 1(34): 21–30.

26 See Faldin, A. V. and Akmanov, R. A. (1988) *S dnem rozhdeniia, komsomol!*, poster, http://www.krasnoyeznamya.ru/pic.php?vrub=rm&pid=36&picid=1893.

27 For images, see Krymov.ru (2017), http://www.krymov.org/performances/opus_7/.

28 The "Kresty" prison is mentioned in Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* as the place where her son and a multitude of others were imprisoned. Shemiakin, when