REVIEW ESSAY

The Mitki and the Art of Postmodern Protest in Russia. By Alexandar Mihailovic. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. xvii, 254 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Chronology. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. $79.95, hard bound.

Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia. Ed. Birgit Beumers, Alexander Etkind, Olga Gurova, and Sanna Turoma. Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe. London: Routledge, 2018. xiv, 248 pp. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. $160.00, hard bound.

What Style is Your Protest?

> "My differences with the Soviet state are purely stylistic."
>
> (Мои расхождения с советской властью чисто стилистические.)
>
> Andrei Siniavskii, 1973

Russia's rich history of protest reaches back through Soviet-era dissidents and the early twentieth century's many uprisings to the pre-revolutionary era. The illiberal Russian state, whether the Romanov's autocracy or Vladimir Putin's "sovereign democracy," has repeatedly given its citizens grounds for dissatisfaction, which has found expression in the many revolts that punctuate Russia's modern history. To name but a few, the Pugachev rebellion of 1773–75, the 1825 Decembrist revolt, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the 1993 constitutional crisis all brought Russians into the streets, where they demonstrated their willingness to give their lives for political change. The two books discussed in this review examine the latest episode in Russia's on-going history of dissent and protest, this time through a different lens. Alexandar Mihailovic's *The Mitki and the Art of Postmodern Protest in Russia* and the thirteen essays of *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* address their subject not in terms of repressive government policies or citizens claiming rights, but rather by considering late-Soviet and post-Soviet protest as a cultural product and esthetic phenomenon. While this approach might not immediately attract hardline social scientists, it actually allows the authors to provide intriguing answers to the two most perplexing questions about political protest in Russia today: What makes recent protests, and most visibly the 2011–12 Snow Revolution, seem so different from their forerunners in Russian history? And what, if anything, have these protests achieved?

Both books by and large dispense with self-evident comparisons in their discussion of what sets today's protests apart from their precursors. As media coverage has shown, the protests that have taken place in Russia during the past thirty years appear relatively modest in size and tame in their demands when compared to earlier insurrections. For example, the strikes launched by St. Petersburg's Putilov ironworkers on Bloody Sunday in 1905 ultimately

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involved millions across the Russian empire, while the largest of Russia's recent protests, the 2011–12 rallies "For Fair Elections," brought between 100,000 and 200,000 people into the streets. The smallest was a mere handful if we include actions by the groups Pussy Riot and Voina or performance artist Petr Pavlenskii. In addition, rather than demand the type of sweeping social and political reform that led to Russia's first constitution in 1906, today's protestors fight more focused battles against the current regime, using rhetoric that has yet to generate a clear vision of what might await Russia after Putin. Perhaps post-Soviet Russia's peculiar form of democracy, in which many appeared content to swap the freedoms of speech and assembly introduced in the 1990s for the promise of stability in the 2000s, has nonetheless preserved the liberties that Russians most value as consumers and denizens of the internet.

Mihailovic's monograph and *Cultural Forms of Protest* place such comparisons and speculations in the background so that they can highlight an aspect of the recent protests that until now has not received the attention it merits: their style. Needless to say, past dissident movements generated their own styles, be it the Decembrists' romantic peasant garb, the bluntness of nineteenth-century nihilists, the Bolsheviks' leather jackets, or Soviet dissidents' vocabulary of scientific essentialism. For each of these movements, the specific style of protest functioned as an accessory to their political platform by expressing the group's beliefs and values, allowing members to realize their vision of the future in some limited way, and drawing a line between the movement's followers and its enemies. The protests examined in the two books under discussion here exhibit comparable stylistic markers, such as the Mitki's sailor shirts and inebriated naiveté, Pussy Riot's punk music and day-glo balaclavas, or the white ribbons, balloons, and clothing of the Snow Revolution. When considered together, however, the work in these two volumes provocatively suggests that the style of recent protest movements in Russia no longer functions as an accessory to a political platform, but rather represents the movement's politics *per se*.

Mihailovic's study provides a useful point of entry into the argument for style supplanting substance in Russian protests of the past thirty years. Usually viewed as an exclusively artistic movement, the Mitki emerged out of the Leningrad underground of the 1980s and illustrate the strategies used by non-conformist artists of the late-Soviet era to position themselves *vne* or outside Soviet discourse, as Alexei Yurchak has pointed out.[1] Mihailovic's examination of the group's alcohol-infused esthetics and arch-ironic output notes that the Mitki's politics, like that of other contemporary groups, "were more a matter of style and unruly aesthetic diversity than of any revolutionary impetus" (202). His analysis of the Mitki's unique manner of dressing, speaking, writing, and painting, which permeated not only their art but also their day-to-day life, argues that "the Mitki pioneered the form of politically multivalent protest art that has become a centerpiece of contemporary Russian dissent activism" (4). The book's detailed reading of the Mitki's collective oeuvre

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1. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 239–43.

approaches works by Dmitrii Shagin, Vladimir Shinkarev, Olga and Aleksandr Florenskii, and Viktor Tikhomirov as multivalent, multimedia expressions of the group's desire to subvert Soviet shibboleths, from the Stalinist cult of personality to dissident discourse and heroic masculinity. Throughout, the author stresses the profound irony infusing the Mitki style, including the individual Mityok's grotesque, obese, asexual, gender-indeterminate, and "revoltingly omnivorous body" (214). While some might not agree that the Mitki represent "the most significant movement of political postmodernism in Russia" (8), Mihailovic makes a convincing case for the group's creative disengagement from Soviet discourse and society constituting its most powerful contribution to political protest in Russia.

Two features from Mihailovic's analysis of the Mitki's "style of cultural being" (208) stand out as the strongest links between their passive revolt in the 1980s and 90s and the more active political protests of the post-Soviet era. First, the Mitki's insistence on the body's materiality, as manifest in the consumption of alcohol or food and abstinence from sex, transformed the body from a means of Soviet production, be it through labor or reproduction, into the locus for self-expression and risk-taking. Second, the group's pervasive irony, which encompassed parody, satire, *stiob*, and even camp, according to Mihailovic, makes tacking down their political platform all but impossible, as the slogan *Mit′ki ne khotait nikogo pobedit′!* (The Mitki do not want to defeat anyone!, 68) suggests. These features functioned horizontally in opposition to the top-down structure of the Soviet state, fostering "unfettered intimacy, both within and across categories of gender and class" (210). As Mihailovic astutely points out, a similar intimacy reappeared in the Snow Revolution, during which protesters used the term *gorizontal′* (horizontal) to contrast their movement with the Russian government's *vertikal′ vlasti* (power vertical, 211–12). In short, the Mitki's political import and legacy lie in an embodied performativity that not only arises from but more importantly inspires intimate horizontal bonds. This idea can be productively expanded to include other artistic subcultures of their day, such as Timur Novikov's Neoacademism, to which Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* seem slightly better suited. Although Mihailovic's probing analysis of the Mitki's oeuvre celebrates the political potential of this embodied performativity, his book concludes with a consideration of Shagin's recent work, which recognizes "the discursive limits of rhetorical nostalgia as a tool of social protest" and "the need for a post-ironic dissidence" (207).

In contrast to Mihailovic's deep analysis of a small group of closely-affiliated artists, *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* (under the editorship of Birgit Beumers, Alexander Etkind, Olga Gurova, and Sanna Turoma) examines the broad sweep of protest in Putin's Russia. The collection opens with Etkind's insightful overview of the 2011–12 protests, which places the Snow Revolution in the context of Russia's emergence in the 2000s as a petrostate. In addition to assessing the steep social costs of what he terms "petromachismo," Etkind justifies the volume's focus on the Snow Revolution's "culture of crisis" due to its capacity for "reflecting all spheres of civil life—revising the past, depicting the present, and foretelling the future" (2). The remaining essays in the volume fulfill this promise by discussing the genealogy of protest in Russia today

(Vladimir Gel′man and Valentina Parisi), as well as different forms of protests, including copycat movements (Mischa Gabowitsch), political consumerism (Gurova), demonstrations with toy figurines (Jennifer G. Mathers), actionism (Alexandra Yatsyk and Jonathan Brooks Platt), an artistic research project (Estonian artist Kristina Norman), and protest poetry (Marijeta Bozovic). Several authors confirm Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev's conclusion that Russia has undergone "a biopolitical turn" in recent years, while others echo Mihailovic's observations about the role of irony and embodied performativity in protests of the post-Soviet era.[2]

Within this rich mix, several contributors highlight the importance of style and form as opposed to political content in Russia's most recent round of protests. For example, Platt's subtle interpretation of actions by pain artist Petr Pavlenskii and the group Voina determines that the latter delivers an edgier message due to its "tactic of subversive affirmation, ironically over-identifying with power to expose its injustice," while Pavlenskii's dead serious bodily mutilations mirror the very regime he protests. If Platt attributes Voina's subversive success to their *stiob*-inflected style, other essays in *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* look to style for an explanation of recent protests' failure to articulate a political platform that would produce a more broad-based or long-lived movement. Along these lines, Ilya Kalinin contends that in 2011–12, protesters' focus on freedom of self-expression, rather than concrete issues, such as economic inequity and waning social services, continues an age-old Russian tradition of viewing culture as "the single locus of relative autonomy of the individual from the state, as a realm of free self-realization and self-representation"(49).[3] According to Kalinin, the "emphasis on stylistic creativity, which became not only a means for the articulation of political protest, but its very content" (53), allowed the government to coopt protestors' rhetoric of cultural elitism and to pose as defender of the pro-Putin majority. Turoma's essay on *Citizen Poet* (*Grazhdanin poet*) reaches a similarly gloomy conclusion in its analysis of the satirical show's "ironic yet utterly nostalgic evocation of the Soviet 1960s," which functions as a veneer masking sexism, elitism, and cultural essentialism (231). This pessimistic assessment of the style of contemporary Russian protests reaches its peak in Beumers' contribution to the volume, which analyzes Putin-era legislation banning obscenity in the Russian media. In addition to determining that such censorship has silenced the dissenting voice in Russia, Beumers bemoans the "shift of protest from the real, political arena into a form of spectacle that suggests *a priori* a disempowerment of the actors/agents in the real world" (161), criticizing protesters for pitching their message not to those in power but to an avid on-line following. Rather than consider how this mediatization places recent Russian protests within a global culture of protest, as pioneered by the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and Euromaidan, Beumers concludes darkly that in today's Russia, "Protest is an act of display without a purpose or an agenda oriented towards the future . . . Russian artist-activists want to have a voice, but they have no language and no discourse of protest" (173, 176). Although these four contributors to *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* agree on the performative nature of recent protests, their opinions about what the supremacy of style over substance actually means differ dramatically from viewing it as a source of subversive power to blaming it for protestors' political impotence.

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[2] Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev, "Biopolitics and Power in Putin's Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62/1 (2015): 45–54.

[3] Kalinin builds his argument in part on Il′ia Budraitskis's analysis of the Russian intelligentsia as style; see Il′ia Budraitskis, "Intelligentsiia kak stil′," *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* 91 (2013) at http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/5/article/31 (last accessed 20 May 2018).

When taken together, the two volumes offer compelling evidence that Russia's recent protests differ from their forerunners not merely in their size and demands, but more importantly in their emphasis on style over substance. Kalinin's genealogy of Russian culture's role as "a displaced representation of an absent civil society, its discursive surrogate" (49), provides a helpful, albeit partial explanation for the overriding importance of style in recent protests. To round out this explanation, we must remember that the style of recent protests in Russia has been shaped in large part by awareness and knowledge of global protest culture. In addition, we must consider the genealogy of the protesting body within Russian culture, so that the performativity identified by Mihailovic and contributors to *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* includes an assessment of bodily precarity, as well as its instrumentalization. While this topic deserves a book of its own, Iurii Lotman's examination of eighteenth-century authorship as a form of martyrdom provides a number of illuminating insights.[4] Briefly stated, Lotman argues that Peter the Great's sweeping secularization of his country included the religious paradigm of guaranteeing the truth of one's word through the willingness to die for it. While the Russian state initially usurped this function, literature and culture took on the martyr's mantle later in the eighteenth century, as seen in the 1802 suicide of social critic Alexander Radishchev.[5] Lotman is careful to stress that within this paradigm, the text is never detached from its bearer, and an author or speaker's bodily sacrifice demands equally dramatic behavioral changes on the part of readers or listeners for communication to have taken place.[6] The longevity of this communicative model is born out in Russia's poet-prophets and writer-martyrs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Once we extend Lotman's model for generating textual truth into the late- and post-Soviet eras, we see that the shift from substance to style in recent protests rejects the paradigm of guaranteeing one's truth through martyrdom, an act that leverages the body's precarity for the sake of social change, at the same time preserving the communicative loop connecting authors, texts, and readers.

Although Lotman limits his analysis to an earlier era, the Stalinist state bears a resemblance to that of Peter the Great insofar as it usurped this model of martyrdom when it made writers "engineers of the human soul" and itself both arbiter and beneficiary of bodily sacrifice. Collectivization, industrialization, the Great Purges, World War II, and the Gulag vividly demonstrated the precarity of all Soviet subjects as well as the state's ability to mobilize the paradigm of martyrdom for its own purposes. As a result, the "performative shift" in post-Stalin discourse, which, according to Yurchak, led to a sense of both the Soviet Union's immutability before 1991 and the inevitability of its demise after the fact, gutted meaning from the paradigm of martyrdom just as it did from ritualized parades and Komsomol meetings. As Kalinin points out, this review's epigraph by dissident writer Andrei Siniavskii expresses an "axiomatic opposition of power and style, power and culture, state authoritarianism and artistic autonomy" (49). In addition, Sinianvskii's repeated insistence that his differences with the Soviet state lay exclusively in the realm of style is a product of this performative shift and represents an attempt to deny his own precarity while on trial and awaiting exile and to bypass entirely the great Russian writer's duties of prophecy and martyrdom.[7] The subtle irony of the adage, which Siniavskii himself described as taking "the form of a joke" (*v vide shutki*), serves multiple purposes: it mocks the call to martyrdom, places Siniavskii outside the Soviet system, and forms a community of stylistically- likeminded people or *svoi*.[8] The fact that Siniavskii's words have become a well-known "winged phrase" for subsequent generations points to the significance of both the stylistic differences he describes and the very style in which he expresses them.

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[4] Iu.M. Lotman, "Arkhaisty—prosvetiteli," *Tynianovskii sbornik: Vtorye tynianovskie chteniia* (Riga, 1986), 192–207.

[5] For Lotman's interpretation of Radishchev's suicide as an instance of self-inflicted martyrdom, see Iu.M. Lotman, "Poetika bytovogo povedeniia v russkoi kul′ture XVIII veka," *Izbrannye stat′i v trekh tomakh, Tom I: Stat′i po semiotike i topologii kul′tury* (Tallinn, 1992), 262–67.

[6] Lotman, "Arkhaisty—prosvetiteli," 199–200.

Like Siniavskii, today's protesters appear by and large to reject martyrdom as a guarantor of the truth of their protest. The reluctance to give one's life for one's cause makes sense when we consider that although the Russian state under Putin has yet to expend human lives as immoderately as its Stalinist precursor, petromachismo has nonetheless led to a precipitous decay of human capital, as Etkind argues (5). The murky circumstances surrounding the deaths of oppositionists, such as Anna Politkovskaia and Boris Nemtsov, the trial and incarceration of two members of Pussy Riot, and the anti-gay pogrom in Chechnia all demonstrate the Russian state's ongoing desire to call the shots in regard to martyrdom and the precarity of its populace.[9] The only protester to mobilize his own precarity in any consistent manner is pain performer Petr Pavlenskii, whose self-mutilations include sewing his lips shut, cutting off his right ear lobe, wrapping himself in barbed wire, and nailing his scrotum to the cobblestones of Red Square. As Platt points out, however, "Pavlenskii's works revolve around the neurotic, hysterical display of 'amputations'" (145) that render his protests another instance of the "terrifying mimicry" of the state's own discourse, which Serguei Outshakine has astutely identified in late-Soviet samizdat.[10] In fact, the Russian state under Putin has even brought such mimicry into its arsenal of anti-protest weapons by coopting the protesters' own words, as Kalinin reminds us.

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[7] Although Siniavskii first coined this aphorism after his 1973 exile to France, it echoes testimony at his and Iulii Daniel′'s 1966 trial: "Как литературный критик я довольно хорошо представлял вкусы и нормы, распространенные в нашей литературе. В ряде важных пунктов они не совпадали с моими писательскими и литературными вкусами. Особенности моего литературного творчества достаточно отличаются от того, что у нас принято и что у нас пропускают. Отличаются не политикой, а художественным мироощущением," *Siniavskii i Daniel′ na skam'e podsudimykh* (New York, 1966), 91. ("As a literary critic, I had a pretty good idea of the prevalent tastes and standards in our literature. On a number of important points, they did not coincide with my tastes as a writer. My literary work differs substantially from what is acceptable here. I don't mean in politics, but in artistic attitudes,") Max Hayward, trans., *On Trial: The Soviet State versus 'Abram Tertz' and 'Nikolai Arzhak'*" (New York, 1966), 122. Siniavskii later recycled the aphorism in a 1982 essay: "у меня с Советской властью вышли в основном эстетические разногласия." Andrei Siniavskii, "Dissidentstvo kak lichnyi opyt," *Sintaksis* 15 (1986): 132.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For insightful analysis of the Pussy Riot trial as "an inadvertent sacrifice," see Anya Bernstein, "An Inadvertent Sacrifice: Body Politics and Sovereign Power in the Pussy Riot Affair," *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 1 (September 2013): 220–41.

In this light, the preponderance of style over substance in recent Russian protest makes sense, since the protesters' style, as opposed to their words, represents a weapon that the state is either reluctant or unable to coopt and mimic effectively. Although it has tried to do so in pro-Putin rallies and youth movements like Nashi, such efforts inevitably suffer from the time-lag and lack of spontaneity that occur when style is dictated top-down rather than horizontally transmitted. The garbled effects and even inadvertent parody of state-mandated style are nowhere more evident than in the viral video of Sveta from Ivanovo, whose 2011 description of United Russia's achievements includes ungrammatical clunkers like "we've started to dress more better" (*my stali bolee luchshe odevat'sia*).[11] On the contrary, when deployed by protesters, parody, irony, and their myriad offshoots provide an endlessly evolving repertoire of clever phrases, gestures, and performative possibilities, which we see in the delightfully absurd transformation of the pro-Putin slogan "If not Putin, then who?" (*Esli ne Putin, to kto?*) into "If not Putin, then a cat" (*Esli ne Putin, to kot*) by protesters in 2012. As Mihailovic and the contributors to *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* prove, today's protesters are the inheritors of late-Soviet *stiob*, which they have cultivated and transformed into new forms of post-Soviet irony. Much as *stiob* did for the Mitki and their contemporaries, so does the sophisticated style of today's protesters allow them to form new horizontal configurations of *svoi* outside the discursive boundaries of Putinism.

While some, like Beumers, might argue that the ironic performativity of current Russian protests is merely a weapon of the weak, we should remember that the performative shift described by Yurchak was a harbinger of the Soviet Union's demise. In addition, the biopolitical turn in Putin's Russia has upped the ante of any decision to adopt a bodily style, gesture, or position that fails to conform to current norms of gender and sexuality. The mere fact that a group of young men at the Ulianovsk Institute of Aeronautical Engineering could create a political ruckus in January 2018, when they posted a parody of a parody of the Italian technopop music video "Satisfaction" on the internet, gives grounds for hope.[12] The video, which shows the cadets twerking in a combination of their own underwear and military caps, went viral and led to suspicions of "homosexual propaganda" and statements of over-serious outrage from a variety of Russian officials.[13] A spate of new "Satisfaction" parodies began to appear on YouTube in support of the cadets' parody, however, making what started as a single video into a movement that embraced groups of all types, including students, swimmers, jockeys, dancers, and even two retired women lip-syncing in the kitchen of their Petersburg communal apartment. In addition to showing "that Russians can still form horizontal connections, despite the state's monopoly on the public sphere," the "Satisfaction" videos demonstrate that the right style can in fact generate political substance, whether the Ulianovsk cadets intended to or not.[14] Rather than lament the emphasis on style in recent Russian protests, we would do better to acknowledge its role in an ongoing performative shift in Russian culture, in which the youthful antics of protesting women like Pussy Riot and scantily clad men like the Ulianovsk cadets assert Putin's precarity within the Russian body politic.

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[10] Serguei Alex. Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 191–214.

[11] "'Nashistka' Sveta iz Ivanovo," *YouTube* (December 6, 2011) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24XBX0Wkmpw&list=PL5aJM3L7BhSyFeZw7A2WoY7UHkcOk8u2G&index=36 (accessed 20 May 2018).

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[12] "Ul′ianovskie kursanty—Satisfaction," *YouTube* (January 20, 2018) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7y2ADtBhFc. For the original video of "Satisfaction" by D.J. Benni Bennasi and the initial parody by a group of young men in the British Army, see Benni Benassi, "Satisfaction (Official Video)," *YouTube* (April 6, 2012) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZcSCT34H84 and "British Army Soldiers Dancing to Satisfaction (Benni Benassy)," *YouTube* (February 8, 2013) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucOhxo9ivg0 (last accessed May 20, 2018).

[13] Eliot Borenstein chronicles public reactions to "Satisfaction" in "Boys Just Want to Have Fun: Just How Queer are the 'Satisfaction' Videos?," *NYU Jordan Center* (February 27, 2018) at http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/boys-just-want-fun-just-queer-satisfaction-videos/#.WtOzTtPwZ3m (last accessed May 20, 2018).

[14] Masha Gessen, "How Russia's Hilarious, Homoerotic 'Satisfaction' Became a Nationwide Meme of Solidarity, *The New Yorker* (January 22, 2018) at https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/how-russias-hilarious-homoerotic-satisfaction-became-a-nationwide-meme-of-solidarity (last accessed May 20, 2018)."