Resurrection by Surrogation: Spectral Performance in Putin's Russia

Maksim Hanukai

> Art is a love affair with reality, which politics tries to replace with surrogates.
> —Giia Rigvava[1]

Walking in Moscow's historic center in May 2017, one could come upon a row of billboards in the middle of Tverskoy Boulevard. Comprising a sort of open-air exhibit—a popular propaganda medium in the aestheticized Moscow of Mayor Sergei Sobyanin—the billboards displayed photographs of Soviet soldiers in action: tossing a hand grenade, wheeling an army truck, unloading a rifle (Figure 1). Despite the dramatic framing, however, these were clearly not authentic war images: the young men and women featured in them looked too well-nourished to have been real soldiers—their gazes too radiant, their poses too studied. In several photographs, the subjects even seemed to forget they were in a war zone, taking a moment to pose directly for the camera. An adjacent billboard with informational text explained that the exhibit was part of a patriotic project organized by the All-Russian Social Movement "The Immortal Regiment of Russia." Entitled *Mesiats Mai* (The Month of May), it was launched in conjunction with the upcoming Victory Day celebrations and featured Russian media celebrities—singers, actors, TV personalities, even fitness bloggers—who had been "enlisted" to reenact the heroic deeds of family members who fought in the Second World War. Short videos of their performances, set to a heartrending song by music contest winner Yuliia Parshuta, were made available on social media. Ordinary citizens were encouraged to make copy-cat videos and post stories about their own relatives using a special hashtag created for the project.[2]

Far from an isolated (and somewhat mawkish) media project, *Mesiats Mai* exemplifies the sorts of "spectral" performance practices that have recently taken center stage in Russia.[3] The project itself fuses two earlier practices: so-called Immortal Regiment processions—annual marches commemorating

1. Gia Rigvava, "Chuvstvo svobody v usloviiakh total′nogo kontrolia," *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, 1996, no. 11, at http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/67/article/1440 (accessed October 8, 2020).

2. The videos are available on YouTube. See, for instance: "MESIATS MAI!!! VSE ZVEZDY!!! Sergei i Dasha Pynzar′, YouTube video, 1:00, posted by "Irina Isaeva," May 10, 2017, at youtu.be/5kCplREa7hM (accessed October 8, 2020).

3. Although the term "spectral" has been used in a variety of contexts following the publication of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), in the present article, I use it to describe certain cultural and political practices that possess a haunting quality due to their extreme reliance on the resurfaced past. I offer a more nuanced definition of "spectral performance" toward the end of my article. On the "spectral turn" in the humanities, see María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (London, 2013).

Slavic Review 79, no. 4 (Winter 2020)
© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2021.6
https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. Billboards installed for the *Mesiats Mai* project. Photo: Vitaly Ragulin.

family members who fought in the Second World War—and the more widespread practice of historical reenactment, which has become extremely popular in Russia. Although not originating in the Kremlin, both practices have in recent years been partially co-opted by the Russian state and have been used to promote its increasingly conservative cultural politics. It would be wrong to reduce these practices to any single motivation or function, determined as they are by whether one examines them from the perspective of the participants or the political actors that lend them institutional and financial support. For instance, historical reenactment offers evident rewards to the reenactor (*rekonstruktor* in Russian): a temporary escape from the pressures of modern life, the feeling of belonging to a community of enthusiasts, the possibility of obtaining a much desired (if ultimately illusory) experience of "authenticity."[4] At the same time—and to the dismay of some reenactors—it is now also being used as an instrument of patriotic education and propaganda, increasingly assimilated into Russian school curricula and promoted more widely as mass entertainment. Regularly featured in official festivities and ceremonies, historical reenactments—particularly of Russian and Soviet military triumphs—have even been used opportunistically in moments of

4. On the practice of historical reenactment in Russia, see Daria Radtchenko, "Simulating the Past: Reenactment and the Quest for Truth in Russia," *Rethinking History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 127–48; Jeffrey Brooks and Boris Dralyuk, "Parahistory: History at Play in Russia and Beyond," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 77–98; and Serguei Oushakine's discussion of patriotic reenactments as affectively charged performative rituals in "Remembering in Public: On the Affective Management of History," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2013): 269–302. For a performance studies oriented reflection on reenactment in the United States, see Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London, 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

geopolitical crisis, as witnessed, for example, by a reenactment of the 1855 Battle of Sevastopol that was staged in that city shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea.[5] In a nation where present-day conflicts are often also conflicts over history—the way it should be (re)interpreted, (re)presented, and now, (re) enacted—the past is never an innocent pastime.

But over and above these motivations, such practices contribute to the suspicion that life has assumed a spectral character in Russia in the twenty-first century—an often surreal form of existence wherein the present is increasingly saturated by the past and ghosts of the dead threaten to displace the living.[6] One never quite knows *when* one may end up these days, nor what strange encounters await when one gets there: from a tête-à-tête with Napoleon to the truly Shakespearean encounter with one's ancestors. Russia's urban centers have at times come to feel like haunted stages, so much so that, while literature, film, television, and visual art continue to offer conflicting visions of the past, a central and, I believe, still underappreciated role is played today by the more archaic, yet no less (post)modern, medium of embodied performance—with its unsurpassed power to shape identities, consolidate communities, touch the affects, and create alternate realities in the here and now. It is certainly no coincidence that theater—that haunted house of high culture—has witnessed a remarkable renaissance (I am tempted to write, *resurrection*) in Russia.[7] Yet while theater caters to the cultural and economic elites, whose own hunger for authenticity it feeds today with ever more haunted immersive "experiences," more pedestrian

5. The event was part of the *Crimean War-Historical Festival*—an annual festival of historical reenactment that was inaugurated in 2014. Similar events have been held throughout Russia. For example, during the 2017 *Times and Epochs* festival—the largest reenactment festival in the world—Moscow's Chistye Prudy were transformed into a replica of nineteenth century Crimea. Both festivals receive funding from the Russian state and are organized by the for-profit company "Ratobortsy."

6. Alexander Etkind examines recent conflicts over history and the way certain repressed episodes from the Soviet past return to haunt the present in *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, 2013). While Chapters 9–11 in particular have influenced my thinking in the present article, my work departs from Etkind's methodologically in focusing less on the involuntary reenactment of traumatic memory than on the political motivations and technologies behind such reenactments. Another scholar, Il′ia Kalinin, has argued that the Kremlin treats the past as an "organic resource" not unlike oil and gas. This, too, suggests a more conscious desire to make use of the past, at least by those in power. See Il′ia Kalinin, "Proshloe kak organicheskii resurs: Istoricheskaia politika i ekonomika renty," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 88, no. 2 (2013), at magazines.gorky.media/nz/2013/2/proshloe-kak-ogranichennyj-resurs-istoricheskaya-politika-i-ekonomika-renty.html (accessed October 12, 2020).

7. See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, 2003). On the resurgence of Russian theater in the twenty-first century, see John Freedman, "Contemporary Russian Drama: The Journey from Stagnation to a Golden Age," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 3 (October 2010): 389–420; Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing Violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol, 2009); and Maksim Hanukai and Susanna Weygandt, introduction to Maksim Hanukai and Susanna Weygandt, eds., *New Russian Drama* (New York, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

forms of spectral performance may be found on city squares and streets and are primarily oriented toward the Russian masses.[8]

The present article explores the troubled cultural and political dynamics that inform such performance practices through a critical look at the other practice behind the *Mesiats Mai* project: the Immortal Regiment. After briefly describing its origins, I draw on theories of memory, sovereignty, and representation (among others) to offer an analysis of the Regiment in the context of Putin's third and fourth presidential terms. The Regiment, I argue, testifies to the emergence of spectral practices that ask the living to act as surrogates for the dead. While it was initially guided by a critical impulse and, moreover, continues to answer certain needs shared by its participants, I argue that the Regiment has become an instrument of state power that serves to reinforce the Kremlin's increasingly spectral politics—one that uses the bodies of its own citizens to grant political visibility to the dead at the expense of the living. I conclude by examining one critical response to the Regiment: a necropolitical "artivist" project by the St. Petersburg-based artist Maksim Evstropov. Using the proven techniques of *stiob* and parody, Evstropov and his collaborators expose the pathological—indeed, "necrophiliac"—nature of the Kremlin's spectral politics. But does their project open up new avenues for resistance and critical reflection or merely reaffirm the morbid state of political life (and actionism) in Putin's fourth presidential term? Are Russian artists doomed to merely represent (*predstavliat'*) the dead—to make them present again by means of performance—or can the dead help us imagine (*predstavit'*) a more vital politics?

"We'll Repeat It If We Must!"

The initial impulse behind the Immortal Regiment was, as already stated, a critical one.[9] The first procession was held in Tomsk on May 9, 2012, the brainchild of three liberal journalists who wanted to strip war commemorations of their political, commercial, and militaristic overtones. The idea was simple: ordinary citizens would march together with photographs of relatives who participated in the war effort against Nazi Germany (Figure 2). In addition, they could upload short biographies of their ancestors to an online register, thereby adding a degree of personalization to what might otherwise appear as an impersonal collective ritual. Borrowing from performance theorist Diana Taylor, one could say that the Regiment thus combined elements of both archive and repertoire: an enduring written record and an ephemeral

8. *Черный русский* (Black Russian, 2016) and *Вернувшиеся* (The Returned, 2016) both take place in "haunted" aristocratic manors. The aesthetic and commercial model for such immersive shows was set by the UK-based theater company Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, which premiered in the Victoria-era Beaufoy Building in London in 2003, before expanding to Boston and New York.

9. The next two paragraphs draw heavily on Mischa Gabowitsch's article "Are Copycats Subversive? Strategy-31, the Russian Runs, the Immortal Regiment, and the Transformative Potential of Non-Hierarchical Movements," in Birgit Beumers et al., eds., *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia* (New York, 2017), 68–89.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. Immortal Regiment procession in Moscow. Photo: Kommersant Photo/Dmitry Dukhanin.

embodied practice.[10] In both respects, however, it sought to distinguish itself from official memorial practices such as the highly militarized Victory Day celebrations and the impersonal databases administered by the state. To safeguard against co-optation, the initiators even drew up a charter in which they defined the Regiment as a "non-commercial, non-political, non-state civic initiative."[11] The charter also stressed the idea of unity across ethnic, religious, and political differences, asserting simply that the Regiment consists of "the millions of deceased and their descendants."[12]

Despite these precautions, however, the Immortal Regiment soon attracted the attention of the Kremlin, which quickly moved to co-opt the initiative. By 2014, the Russian state was already issuing centralized instructions to local representatives of the Regiment. That same year, the Regiment's Moscow coordinator, Nikolai Zemtsov, began to accept help from Putin's United Russia party and Moscow city authorities, eventually creating his own parallel organization, the above mentioned All-Russia Social Movement "The Immortal Regiment of Russia." State-sponsored processions have since then been held all over Russia and even in war-torn Donetsk, where Zemtsov encouraged organizers to add portraits of separatist fighters killed in the ongoing conflict

10. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, 2003).

11. "Ustav Polka," *Bessmertnyi Polk: Ofitsialnyi sait dvizheniia*, at moypolk.ru/ustav-polka (accessed October 12, 2020).

12. Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in Ukraine.[13] Putin himself led a widely-televised march in Moscow in 2015. Drawing up to 500,000 participants, it was later compared by the Russian culture minister Vladimir Medinsky to the display of military hardware at the official parade on Red Square (a dehumanizing analogy that contradicted the anti-militaristic pathos of the Tomsk initiative).[14] The state seems to have also orchestrated a campaign to disempower the original organizers. In February 2015, the local TV station where they worked was abruptly shut down; later that year pro-Kremlin media reported that they stole their idea from a retired policeman in Tyumen.

To understand why this initiative was so eagerly (and easily) co-opted by the Kremlin, I first examine the intersection of memory and politics in Russia, or how the construction of a national memory of the Second World War overlaps with concerns about legitimacy and power.[15] My contention, however, is that a memory studies frame alone will not be sufficient to answer this question and more productive avenues of inquiry may be opened up through the application of more speculative theoretical frameworks.

First held under Leonid Brezhnev on May 9, 1965, the annual Victory Day celebrations have from the start been instruments of state power.[16] As sociologist Lev Gudkov explains, unsure of his standing with the army and the KGB after the removal of Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev "launched a new propaganda campaign for the sacralization of [the Second World War] and the conservation of the regime, which included the rehabilitation of Stalin, but which was veiled by an official cult of war veterans, primarily marshals and general officers."[17] Setting the template for nearly all future celebrations, that initial event featured a military parade on Red Square and speeches honoring the heroic sacrifices of Soviet soldiers.[18] Victory in the Second World

13. In fact, copy-cat processions have now been held in more than 500 cities all over the world. See "Immortal Regiment Marches across the Globe," *Russia Beyond*, May 8, 2019, at rbth.com/lifestyle/330343-immortal-regiment-2019-world (accessed October 12, 2020).

14. Medinsky writes: "Just as the Armata [tank] is heir to the traditions of the legendary Soviet school of structural engineering, so do millions of Russian citizens see themselves as heirs and successors to the legendary glory of their ancestors," Vladimir Medinsky, "Kto ne kormit svoiu kul′turu, budet kormit′ chuzhuiu armiiu," *Izvestiia*, June 17, 2015, at iz.ru/news/587771 (accessed October 12, 2020).

15. I draw here on Aleida Assmann's distinction between social, political, and national memory in her *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity*, trans. Sarah Clift (New York, 2015).

16. Stalin held the first victory parade on June 24, 1945, and instituted a May 9 work holiday. However, the work holiday was suspended in 1947 (it was reinstated under Brezhnev) and no additional Victory Day parades were held in the Soviet Union until 1965. On the cult of the Second World War in Russia, see Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York, 1994); Nina Tumarkin, "The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory," *European Review* 11, no. 4 (October 2003): 595–611; and Nataliya Danilova, *The Politics of War Commemoration in the UK and Russia* (New York, 2015).

17. Lev Gudkov, "'Pamiat′' o voine i massovaia identichnost′ rossiian," in Mikhail Gabovich, ed., *Pamiat′ o voine 60 let spustia: Rossiia, Germaniia, Evropa* (Moscow, 2005), 91.

18. An important exception was made for the 30th anniversary of Victory Day in 1975. On that occasion, a "manifestation of youth" was held on Red Square in place of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

War (or the Great Patriotic War as it came to be called in the Soviet Union) became a source of national pride and unity as the socially and ethnically diverse political body of the nation was brought together and made visible by means of a communal ritual. The celebrations, furthermore, gave legitimacy to the military and political elites who were portrayed as competent leaders in a time of conflict: first against Nazi Germany, then against Russia's new enemies in the Cold War. After a brief detente in the 1990s, the United States and Europe once again came to be seen as antagonistic powers under Putin, who has used several Victory Day speeches to stoke resentment against the west.[19] Giving rise to the popular patriotic slogan, "We'll repeat it if we must!" (*Esli nado—povtorim!*), such posturing extends the postwar tradition of identifying all perceived western enemies as "fascists" while portraying present day geopolitical conflicts as reenactments of an historical drama/trauma.[20]

A strong, affective component has always been crucial for the performative success of these invented rituals. In his classic, "What is a Nation?" (1882), Ernest Renan observed that "shared suffering unites more than joy," and that "acts of mourning are more potent than those of triumph since they impose duties and require a common effort."[21] But he also understood that feelings of triumph and suffering need not be mutually exclusive and can be mixed together to serve up an even more potent emotional cocktail. While triumphalism usually held sway in official celebrations, notes of suffering and sacrifice have also been regularly struck as the Soviet Union psychologically compensated for its staggering human losses in the war by adopting the posture of Europe's Savior (a form of tragic messianism that Russia first began to cultivate in the nineteenth century). Moreover, emphasis on the sacrifices of the war generation were meant to inspire feelings of duty among their descendants, in effect shaming them into contributing to the communist project. As Nina Tumarkin explains: "The 20 million alleged martyrs had, after all, given up their lives so that successive generations might flourish in a world free of fascism….The idealized war experience was a reservoir of national suffering to be tapped and tapped again to mobilize loyalty, maintain order and achieve

traditional military parade, during which Soviet youths stood shoulder-to-shoulder with surviving veterans in a ceremony that heavily emphasized the importance of continuity and duty. This event was "reenacted" (after a fashion) for the 60th anniversary in 2005, when a procession organized by the Kremlin-sponsored youth group *Nashi* culminated in the following oath addressed to veterans: "I take the homeland from the hands of the older generation. Yesterday, you fought at the front for freedom, independence, and a happy life. Today I continue this fight—wherever my country needs me," Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (New York, 2019), 31. Both events may be seen as conceptual precursors to the Immortal Regiment.

19. See, for example, the following newspaper reports: Andrew Higgins, "Putin Swipes at West During Victory Day Parade in Moscow," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2016, at nytimes.com/2016/05/10/world/europe/putin-russia-victory-day-parade.html; "Putin Hits Out At U.S. In Red Square Parade Speech," *RFE/RL*, May 9, 2018, at https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-marks-end-of-world-war-ii-with-military-parade-on-red-square/29216745.html (accessed October 12, 2020).

20. The words of the slogan come from the postwar song "On our Way!" (В путь!, 1954) by Mikhail Dudin. Together with the recently repurposed St. George's ribbon, they often adorn the cars of Russian citizens in the days surrounding the May 9 holiday.

21. Quoted in Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a semblance of energy to counter the growing nationwide apathy and loss of popular resilience of spirit."[22] Changing political winds notwithstanding, the sustained cultivation of such emotions left a lasting mark on the late Soviet generation and its offspring, leading Gudkov to observe, in 2005, that the war has become "a surrogate for 'culture'—a semantic field for acting out all the most important plots and themes of contemporary life."[23] This, too, explains the importance that the Putin regime has placed on Victory Day celebrations. Serguei Oushakine writes that such celebrations have become central to the Kremlin's "affective management of history," which relies on historical images, sounds, and objects to create emotional linkages between the present and the past.[24] Having failed to offer Russian citizens a new system of coordinates—arguably an impossible task in our "liquid [super]modernity"[25]—the Kremlin has instead sought to produce "an affective cartography of history that was not experienced firsthand," resurrecting the traditions and rituals of bygone years to respond to problems it faces today.[26]

The most significant addition to the annual Victory Day celebrations, the Immortal Regiment may be seen as a means to address a specific problem: the inevitable disappearance of surviving veterans of the Second World War.[27] According to Aleida Assmann, personal memories exist within a limited temporal horizon: "After about eighty to one hundred years, there is a clear line drawn. This is the period in which different generations—three as a general rule, but on rare occasions, there can be as many as five—exist at the same time and develop a community through the personal exchange of experiences, memories, and stories."[28] With each passing generation, events once held to be important begin to lose their significance; memories fade away or become supplanted by legends and myths. In exceptional cases, like those involving great trauma, this process may be prolonged. Marianne Hirsch famously coined the term "postmemory" to describe the relationship of succeeding generations to "powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births

22. Tumarkin, "The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory," 601. Thaw-era poet Robert Rozhdestvensky summed up the feelings inspired by the Kremlin's propaganda in his poem "Yes, boys!" (Да, мальчики!, 1963): "We are guilty / Very guilty: / It was not we / who fell into the darkness / with the assault party. / And that autumn—/ trampled by war—/ we were not at the front, / but in the rear. / At the night sounds / we did not shudder in fear. / Saw neither / captivity, / nor prison! / We are guilty, / we were born too late. / Forgive us: / We are guilty." This poem was recently cited in the Brusnikin Workshop's performance of *V.E.R.A.*, a verse play by Andrei Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepol′skaia that draws parallels between the 1960s and 2010s. The premiere was held in Moscow's Voznesenskii Center in June 2019.

23. Gudkov, "'Pamiat′' o voine i massovaia identichnost′ rossiian," 99.

24. Oushakine, "Remembering in Public," 274.

25. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000); and Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London, 2009).

26. Oushakine, "Remembering in Public," 274.

27. Official figures show that there were fewer than 75,000 living veterans of the Second World War in Russia as of April 2019, "Mintrud nazval chislo prozhivaiushchikh v Rossii uchastnikov Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny," *Federal′noe agenstvo novostei*, May 8, 2019, at https://riafan.ru/1177045-mintrud-nazval-chislo-prozhivayushikh-v-rossii-uchastnikov-velikoi-otechestvennoi-voiny (accessed October 12, 2020).

28. Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[29] She went on to define postmemorial work as an effort "to reactivate and reembody more distant...memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression."[30] By allowing participants to performatively reembody their ancestors, the Immortal Regiment helps preserve—and in some cases construct—a "living link" between generations. Many participants in the marches carry photographs of ancestors they did not even know—grandparents and great-grandparents who died before they were born. The Immortal Regiment thus becomes a powerful instrument of mediation, helping ensure the continued relevance of the war cult after the remaining veterans have passed on.[31]

The co-optation of the initiative by the Kremlin, however, shifts the Immortal Regiment into a new performative frame, merging family (or social) memory with national memory.[32] As Assmann observes, "Contrary to the plural voices of social memory, which is memory 'from below' and which repeatedly dissolves with generational shifts, national memory is a much more unifying construction that acts on society 'from above': it is grounded in political institutions and invested in a longer temporal duration of survival."[33] And yet, one could argue that not every construction "from above" is perceived as such, and the most effective means of constructing a national memory may be to integrate the needs and perspectives coming "from below." Michel Foucault famously contrasted *technologies of power*, "which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination," with *technologies of the self*, "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls...so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[34] While the former depend on systems of prohibition and punishment, the latter are grounded in individuals' own internalized beliefs and desires. The Immortal Regiment, I argue, conforms to Foucault's definition of non-coercive political technologies. According to surveys conducted by the Levada Center, 82% of Russians interpreted the 2015 procession as an event honoring veterans of the Second World War, while only 8% thought the action was designed to prop up the

29. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 103.

30. Hirsch, 111.

31. Oushakine gives other examples of material props and rituals that have been introduced in recent years "to make sure that time remains powerless when it comes to young people's memory" (as the Soviet film star Vasilii Lanovoi noted during the presentation of a new patriotic project called "Hurray for the Victory!" [*Ura Pobede!*]). See Serguei Oushakine, "Remembering in Public," 279.

32. On the concept of performance frames, see Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York, 2003), 17–18.

33. Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 23.

34. Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, 1988), 18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

current regime.[35] As Ian Rachinskii, chairman of the Moscow Memorial society, explains: "Russian citizens saw the Immortal Regiment as a private initiative; they don't identify it with the current regime and government even though the latter has seized it from civic activists."[36] Perceiving the disappearance of veterans as a threat to the longevity of a national cult, the Kremlin clearly saw the Immortal Regiment as an opportunity: a non-coercive political technology that could be co-opted to further its own ends. It drew on its citizens' need to honor and preserve their family memory to give new life to a national memory that was in danger of disappearing.

Yet this does not fully explain the emergence of spectral performance in contemporary Russia, nor the surprising ways that such performance is today used to "stage" the Russian body politic. To better understand this dimension, I will first examine the Immortal Regiment from the intersecting perspectives of political theology and modern biopolitics, which center on the complex symbolism of sovereign bodies and the more diffuse management of the popular flesh. This, in turn, will set up my discussion of performance and representation in the next two sections—both of which rely on embodied acts of surrogation.[37] As I hope to show, the Immortal Regiment is more than an attempt to breathe new life into a dying war cult and more than another performative ritual instituted for the purpose of the affective management of history. Rather, fashioning a link between the temporal and the eternal while simultaneously blurring conventional boundaries between life and death, it lends support to an oppressive political regime that draws in equal parts on traditional and modern mechanisms of state power to assert sovereign authority over its increasingly spectral subjects.

Bodies and Flesh

As is well known, Carl Schmitt's controversial insight that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"[38] was developed by Ernst Kantorowicz in his classic study of European kingship, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957). Drawing on an eclectic range of sources—from jurisprudence, literature, theology, even numismatics—Kantorowicz showed that Christological thinking rooted in the Epistles of St. Paul was displaced to the secular sphere by medieval politicians and jurists who developed the notion of the king's "geminated" (or twinned) persona: simultaneously private and political, mortal and immortal. This

35. "Den′ pobedy i aktsiia Bessmertnyi polk," Levada-Tsentr, May 29, 2015, at levada.ru/2015/05/29/den-pobedy-i-aktsiya-bessmertnyj-polk/ (accessed October 12, 2020).

36. Quoted in "Aktsiia 'Bessmertnyi polk' nashla podderzhku u podavliaiushego bol′shinstva rossiian," Levada-Tsentr, May 29, 2015, at levada.ru/2015/05/29/aktsiya-bessmertnyj-polk-nashla-podderzhku-u-podavlyayushhego-bolshinstva-rossiyan/ (accessed October 12, 2020).

37. For the purpose of this article, I take "surrogation" to mean simply the production of "surrogates," i.e., persons or things appointed to represent—make present again—someone or something else.

38. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 36.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

notion, he explains, was not founded in any legal or constitutional doctrine, but in theology: "it mirrors the duplication of natures in Christ."[39] The two natures of Christ, divine and human, were transferred in the medieval period to the person of the king, who thereby acquired, in addition to his natural body, a sublime body endowed with divine grace. The purpose of this performative magic was to invest political institutions and actors with the charisma of sacred authority while simultaneously ensuring the unhindered continuity of the royal line by symbolically placing it in a mystical relationship with the eternal. Most visibly on display on the occasion of royal funerals, when lifelike effigies of kings were placed next to their corpses, the twinned nature of royal sovereignty was succinctly captured in the English funerary cry, "The king is dead! Long live the king!," which, in its omission of individual names, Kantorowicz writes, "powerfully demonstrates the perpetuity of kingship."[40] The death of the king's natural body had no adverse impact on his body politic; the latter continued to exist in a mystical realm outside time and was, therefore, at least theoretically immortal.

While Kantorowicz limits his study to the medieval and early modern periods, more recently scholars have begun to wonder whether the politico-theological did not survive the transition from monarchical to postmonarchical societies. Did the emergence of liberal democracy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries put an end to the fiction of the King's Two Bodies or did this fiction persist in other forms? Do theological notions continue to play a role in modern political life or have they been swept away by the logic of secularization and disenchantment?

In what is perhaps the most sustained effort to address such questions, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Remains of Sovereignty* (2011), Eric L. Santner argues that the complex symbolic structures and dynamics of sovereignty described by Kantorowicz "do not simply disappear from the space of politics once the body of the king is no longer available as the primary incarnation of the principle and functions of sovereignty."[41] Rather, bringing Kantorowicz into dialogue with Freud and Foucault (among others), Santner shows that the "structures and dynamics" of sovereignty "'migrate' into a new location that thereby assumes a turbulent and disorienting semiotic density previously concentrated in the 'strange material and physical presence' of the king."[42] That new location is "the sublime (but also potentially abject) flesh of the new bearer of the principle of sovereignty, the People."[43] To be sure, "flesh" is understood here not simply in physiological terms ("the corporeal matter beneath the skin that normally remains hidden

39. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, 2016), 58.

40. Kantorowicz, 412.

41. Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, 2011), 33. See also Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," in Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Secular World* (New York, 2006), 148–187.

42. Santner, 33.

43. Ibid., 34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from view"), but as a "semiotic—and somatic—vibrancy,"[44] "a spectral yet visceral surplus immanence"[45] with which subjects in liberal democracies are symbolically invested. This "errant bit of flesh"[46] allows citizens to enjoy certain entitlements; however, it also opens them up to new forms of management from above. Introducing an important adjustment to Foucault's notion of *biopolitics*—which refers to the emergence of modern forms of governmentality directed at the management of life—Santner proposes that "the real object of the new physics of power is not simply the body or life but rather the flesh that has become separated from the body of the king and has entered, like a strange alien presence, into that of the people."[47] As he explains:

> If we think of the flesh as the *übersinnlich* [supersensory] element that 'fattens' the one who occupies the place of power and authority...one of the central problems for modernity is to learn how to track the vicissitudes of these royal remains in their now-dispersed and ostensibly secularized, disenchanted locations. As I have been arguing, the discourses and practices that we now group under the heading of 'biopolitics' come to be charged with these duties, with the caretaking of the sublime—but also potentially abject, potentially *entsetzlich* [horrible]—flesh of the new bearer of the principle of sovereignty, the People. The dimension of the flesh comes, in a word, to be assimilated to the plane of health, fitness, and wellness of bodies and populations that must, in turn, be obsessively measured and tested—or, in the extreme, thanato-political context, exterminated. Political theology and biopolitics are, in a word, *two modes of appearance of the flesh* whose enjoyment entitles its bearers to the enjoyment of entitlements in the social space they inhabit.[48]

The migration of sovereignty thus endows the people with certain powers, but also exposes them to new forms of biopolitical control. Such control assumes its most extreme form in the state of exception when, according to Giorgio Agamben, certain groups may be deprived of their political and legal rights and thereby reduced to a state of "bare life"—a sort of violent disinvestment of the flesh that is simultaneously a performative seizure of sovereignty.[49] Modern politics is thus always also biopolitics, according to Santner, "not simply because the wealth of nations—the commonwealth—is now seen to reside in the well-being of its population but rather because the procedures of *Setzen* and *Entsetzen*, of positing and deposing, that formerly focused on the figure of the sovereign now transpire within the life of every citizen."[50] "In a word," he concludes, "the privilege and horror, the sublimity and

44. Ibid., 4.

45. Ibid., 103.

46. Ibid., 19.

47. Ibid., 12. Foucault developed his theory of biopolitics in the final section of *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York, 1990), and again in his *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart (New York, 2011).

48. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 245–46.

49. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, 1998) and Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, 2005). Agamben draws on Schmitt's famous formulation that the "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

50. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

abjection, of the flesh now belong in some sense to the fate of every member of the polity."[51]

If these reflections on the representational dimension of European sovereignty seem far removed from the performance practices with which I began my article, it is because we still need to account for the particularities of the Russian context, with its distinct historical trajectory and politico-theological traditions. In a recent essay entitled "Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty," Alexei Yurchak has argued that the early years of the Soviet Union witnessed the emergence of novel forms of corporeal gemination as the new communist state was forced to grapple with the issues of legitimacy and continuity following the untimely death of Vladimir Lenin.[52] Yurchak focuses on the 1924 decision to artificially preserve Lenin's body, which, he speculates, had less to do with the desire, shared by some party members inspired by Nikolai Fedorov's philosophy of the "common cause," to bring Lenin back to life than with the need to symbolically anchor the idea of the immortal and perpetually renewed body of the Communist Party. Just as the king's body in absolute monarchy was doubled into mortal and immortal parts, so, Yurchak argues, was the body of the new sovereign, the Party, twinned into the quasi-biological mortal body comprised of party members and leaders on the one hand, and the foundational and immortal truth of Leninism on the other. The latter was, in turn, anchored in the material and seemingly unchanging body of Lenin, which millions of Soviet citizens queued up to see every year in the mausoleum. At once recalling and departing from the funereal practices of European monarchies—the display of effigies to kings next to their corpses—the Party in effect turned Lenin's own body into an effigy. Deprived of most of its biological matter but preserving the outward appearance of the original, it became the visible marker of the party's immortality and, therefore, its enduring sovereignty.

What happened to Lenin's body after the collapse of the Soviet Union is well known: stripped of the charismatic authority that had previously made it a symbolic guarantor of sovereignty, it became little more than a freak tourist attraction, preserved in the mausoleum largely out of political calculation and institutional inertia.[53] And yet, in contrast to European liberal democracies, where sovereignty passed from the king's body to the flesh of the people,

51. Ibid.

52. "Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty," *Representations* 129, no. 1 (February 2015): 116–157.

53. On the Lenin cult and debates over whether to remove Lenin's body, see: Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983); and Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (New York, 2000), 44–46. Of course, the subversive potential of depicting Lenin's *rotting* body had been discovered much earlier within certain unofficial subcultures in the Soviet Union, as witnessed, for instance, by the following lines from the 1986 song "Everything is Going According to Plan" (Всё идёт по плану) by the psychedelic punk rock band *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*: "The key to our borders has been broken in two / And our Father Lenin has completely withered away / He's decayed into mold and white honey / And the Perestroika is still going and going according to plan" (Границы ключ переломлен пополам / А наш батюшка Ленин совсем усоп / Он разложился на плесень и на липовый мёд / А перестройка всё идёт и идёт по плану).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

post-Soviet Russia, I argue, experienced a crisis of political representation that exposed sovereign power for what it really is: an empty place situated in the gap between the symbolic and the real.[54] To some extent this situation exists in all modern democracies. However, as Claude Lefort warns in a passage that seems particularly relevant to the post-Soviet context, the recognition that power is an empty place can give rise to "the unbearable image of a real vacuum" that needs to be filled at no matter what cost:

> The authority of those who make public decisions or who are trying to do so vanishes, leaving only the spectacle of individuals or clans whose one concern is to satisfy their appetite for power. Society is put to the test of a collapse of legitimacy by the opposition between the interests of classes and various categories, by the opposition between opinions, values, and norms… and by all the signs of the fragmentation of the social space, of heterogeneity. In these extreme situations, representations that can supply an index of social unity and identity become invested with a fantastic power, and the totalitarian adventure is under way.[55]

Perhaps not a "totalitarian," but certainly an authoritarian adventure has been under way in Russia since Putin's assumption of power, aided by the (re-)introduction of political symbols that serve as indices of social unity. The post-Soviet symbolic vacuum has been filled, on the one hand, by a steady stream of media representations that purport to show what may be called "the President's Two Bodies": those bare-chested performances of physical prowess that stem not only from a kind of distinctly Russian cult of hypermasculinity but also from the biopolitical and politico-theological need to assure the public of Putin's extraordinary vitality and—if rumors of plastic surgery are to be believed—"immortality."[56] Official portrayals of Putin's sexualized body bring representations of royal sovereignty up to date for the age of James Bond and *GQ*, while also signaling a departure from the "mummified" leadership of the late Soviet period and the notoriously "plastered" public appearances of Putin's immediate predecessor. But the symbolic vacuum is also being filled by bodies of a more spectral sort that signal the emergence of new forms of the "immortal dead." World War II veterans, in particular, have assumed some of the symbolic functions earlier ascribed to Lenin, in some ways repeating a process that took place already in the 1960s when Brezhnev introduced the cult of the Second World War to supplant that of Joseph Stalin. The sheer size of this new immortal group, however, has forced the Kremlin to search for novel methods of preservation. Resurrection has thus become increasingly a matter of surrogation, a process by which the dead are brought back to life in performance with the help of more or less satisfying surrogates.

54. Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," 159.

55. Lefort, 167.

56. On the sexualization of Putin's body, see Helena Goscilo, "Putin's Performance of Masculinity: The Action Hero and Macho Sex-Object," in Helena Goscilo, ed., *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (London, 2012), 180–207. Putin's rumored plastic surgery was the butt of many jokes in Varvara Faer's satirical theater show *BerlusPutin*, which premiered at Moscow's Teatr.doc in 2012.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Effigies of the Flesh

The Immortal Regiment turns ordinary citizens into what performance theorist Joseph Roach calls "effigies of the flesh"—"specially nominated mediums that fill a vacancy created by the absence of the original."[57] According to Roach: "Beyond ostensibly inanimate effigies fashioned from wood or cloth, there are more elusive but more powerful effigies fashioned from flesh. Such effigies are made by performances. They consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which different people may step according to circumstances and occasions."[58] Drawing on Kantorowicz, Roach observes that such effigies are particularly needed in times of political instability or transition, when the disappearance of earlier symbols of permanence prompts a manic search for surrogates. "A crisis of royal succession," Roach writes, "is perforce a crisis of cultural surrogation, necessarily rich in performative occasions and allegories of origin and segregation."[59] In his wide-ranging study, Roach shows how communities across many periods and cultures have turned to surrogate performances as a means of perpetuating themselves. Faced with a symbolic void, the communities fashion improvised narratives of authenticity and priority in order "to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed."[60] These narratives are, in turn, reenacted in what Roach calls "performances of origin." In effect instruments for "trying out" candidates for the role that had been left vacant, such performances call for an embodied form of surrogation in which the living turn themselves into effigies of the dead.

The Immortal Regiment turns ordinary Russian citizens into living effigies in what amounts to a performative act of surrogation. In fact, such effigies are substitutes for at least two missing originals. First, they "resurrect" ancestors who fought in the Second World War and whose disappearance from public life threatens the longevity of a heroic cult that has been central to Russian memorial and political culture. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they become surrogate bearers of sovereignty that was displaced and dispersed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Formerly located in the geminated bodies of royal and other modern day sovereigns, sovereignty has been displaced onto whole "regiments" of spectral beings who, for the brief span of the performance, occupy an indeterminate position between life and death, mortality and immortality, selfhood and otherness. The famously doubled body of the actor—who is always both self and other, performer and role—gives way here to the truly uncanny doubleness of the Regiment participant who is united by kinship with his or her assumed persona. The dimension of the "flesh" (as Santner calls it) is thus relocated into the gap between the natural body of the surrogate and the immortal presence that, for a time, comes to possess it.[61]

57. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996), 36.
58. Ibid., 36.
59. Ibid., 44.
60. Ibid., 2–3.
61. It is this politico-theological dimension of the Immortal Regiment, as well as its elevation of a singular, politically resonant historical event, that, to my mind, distinguishes

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 3. Immortal Regiment procession in Barnaul. Kommersant Photo/ Andrey Kasprishin.

Photography plays a crucial role in this ritual act of surrogation. As already mentioned, participants in Immortal Regiment processions carry photographic portraits of their ancestors—grave chest high head shots of men and women in uniform. Seen from a distance, these portraits dominate one's field of vision, concealing the faces of the people who carry them (Figure 3). This results in a kind of double de-individuation: on the one hand, individual participants disappear behind photographic "masks" made from the images of their ancestors; on the other, the subjects of the photographs themselves are lost in a sea of virtually identical images, neither of which is able to stand out, stand apart from the mass, become individuated. Affectively, such a vision is both uplifting and unsettling. The sheer quantity of these "floating faces" creates a powerful effect of the sublime, which, as Edmund Burke observed, is an emotion closely linked to our fears of death and the otherworldly.[62] Moreover, the gazes of the ghostly subjects serve as a strong moral injunction, all the more troubling in that it comes from the resurfaced *personae* ("persons," but also "theatrical masks") of the Fathers. To some extent, this

it from such traditional rituals of surrogation as the Mexican Día de los Muertos. Tellingly, during the 2018 World Cup in Russia, the Russian authorities forbade Mexican soccer fans from holding a Diá de los Muertos parade on Red Square after Communist Party (CPRF) lawmakers objected to the event being so close to Lenin's tomb. No such objections were raised just a few weeks earlier in the case of the Immortal Regiment. See "Mexican parade at World Cup cancelled after fears of proximity to Lenin's grave," *Guardian*, June 29, 2018, at theguardian.com/football/2018/jun/29/mexico-day-of-the-dead-parade-moscow-cancelled-lenin (accessed October 13, 2020).

62. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is, of course, the effect produced by all photographs, whose *eidos*, Roland Barthes tells us, is always death. Barthes even coined the term *Spectrum* to describe the photographic subject: "because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead."[63] I am inclined, however, to agree more with Ekaterina Vasilieva, the author of a recent Russian book on photography, who argues that the essence of photography is rather in blurring the boundary between life and death, making it "a means of penetrating the world of specters."[64] Such features contribute to what Vasilieva considers to be the "archaic" essence of this modern medium.[65] One could add that, in the case of the Immortal Regiment, the archaic essence of photography also comes through in the unmistakable resemblance between the photographic portraits and Russian Orthodox icons carried by observers in religious processions—yet another substitution that lends the action a distinctly politico-theological air.[66]

Spectral Life

Redrawing boundaries between life and death is, of course, an important mechanism of biopower. According to Foucault, the old "power of death" that once distinguished the sovereign has been supplanted in modern societies by "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life,"[67] causing the state to demonstrate its sovereign power not by deciding when "to *take* life or *let* live" but when "to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death."[68] As a result, the placement of normative boundaries to determine *who* is allowed to die and *when* and *how* they can do so becomes one aim of biotechnological practices, which, as Thomas Lemke explains, "create a new relationship between life and death and dissolve the epistemic and normative boundaries between the human and the nonhuman."[69] This, too, helps explain the Kremlin's attraction to the Immortal Regiment. As Anya Bernstein has recently observed: "While the [neoliberal Russian] state withdraws in certain domains, it seeks to retain its function of managing death and immortality,

63. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), 9.

64. Ekaterina Vasilieva, *Fotografiia i vnelogicheskaia forma* (Moscow, 2019), 119. Photography, she writes, "conflates the living with the dead, deprives life and death of a clear antagonistic boundary, observes the one to be the form and continuation of the other," Vasilieva, 118.

65. Ibid., 26.

66. This resemblance was not lost on Natalia Poklonskaya, at the time the Prosecutor of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, who brought an icon of Nicholas II to the May 9, 2016 procession of the Immortal Regiment in Simferopol. See "Nataliia Poklonskaia pronesla v 'Bessmertnom polku' ikonu Nikolaia II," *TASS*, May 9, 2016, at tass.ru/obschestvo/3267582 (accessed October 13, 2020).

67. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York, 1978), 140.

68. Foucault, 138.

69. Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederick Trump (New York, 2011), 93–94.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which remains an important source of sovereignty."[70] The Immortal Regiment not only allows the state to symbolically assert its sovereignty by deciding who is worthy of becoming "immortal," "abolishing death" for certain privileged groups, it also modifies the existential status of its *living* subjects who come to temporarily occupy what Agamben would call a "zone of indistinction," a liminal space between the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman, political life (*bios*) and natural life (*zoē*).[71] Indeed, on a symbolic level, the condition created by the Immortal Regiment resembles that which Agamben (drawing on Schmitt) associates with the state of exception (in a way, a good definition of all performance). But if Agamben introduces the term "bare life" to describe the condition of the *homo sacer*—the "sacred man" whom the state of exception plunges into an indeterminate state at once inside and outside the realm of law—I propose "spectral life" to render the liminal state of participants in the Immortal Regiment who willingly transform themselves into living effigies.

Thus as much as the Immortal Regiment is about the preservation of memory, it is also about the demonstration of sovereignty—both that located in the "flesh" of its spectral subjects and that manifested by the organizing power of the spectacle which, in co-opting it, asserts control over the boundary between life and death. It is also about aesthetic and political representation—or rather about the aesthetic underpinnings of all legitimate power in modern societies. Frank Ankersmit has argued that in representative democracy legitimate power exists in the "aesthetic gap" between the voter and the representative (or state), leading him to conclude that "we should abandon the doctrine of popular sovereignty just like that of the divine right of kings," and instead admit that "no segment of society and no institution, can properly be said to 'own' the state and the political powers embodied by it."[72] Lefort, too, as we have seen, locates power in modern democracy within the "empty place" between the symbolic and the real, leading him to conclude that democracy requires the continuous work of "shaping" (*mise en forme*) the popular flesh, which is accomplished by "giving meaning to" (*mise en sens*) and "staging" (*mise en scène*) the body politic.[73] Both Ankersmit and Lefort thus suggest that, in modern democracy, power has become purely aesthetic. Bringing Lefort's views into dialogue with those of Jacques Rancière, however, Martín Plot has more recently proposed that we instead view modern states as forms of government where different political regimes—understood as "sets of visibilities and invisibilities, of different generative principles and distributions of the

70. Anya Bernstein, "Love and Resurrection: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia," *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 1 (March 2016): 20. See also Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev, "Biopolitics and Power in Putin's Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2015): 45–54.

71. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

72. Frank Ankersmit, *Political Representation* (Stanford, 2002), 118. See also Frank Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford, 1997); and *Historical Representation* (Stanford, 2002).

73. Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," 153, 164.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thinkable and the unthinkable"—intertwine.[74] Isolating three such regimes—the theologico-political (monarchy), the aesthetico-political (democracy), and the epistemologico-political (totalitarianism)—Plot argues that democracy is "the period inaugurated with the advent of the aesthetico-political regime as the predominant one—while remaining in competition and coexistence with both the theological and epistemological regimes."[75] Modern democracy can thus be described as "the form of society in which the aesthetic regime of politics has the upper hand," while to some extent retaining elements of the other two regimes.[76]

The coexistence of these three regimes is, I believe, evident in Putin's Russia, where a simulacrum of representative democracy retains residues of both the imperial and Soviet pasts. This is why, for example, a theologico-political immortality discourse can coexist with a Soviet era war cult and ostensibly democratic elections. The predominance of the aesthetico-political in modern Russia is still salient in practices like the Immortal Regiment, however, which may be seen as attempts to "stage" the Russian body politic and thereby define the limits of political visibility. Drawing on Plot/Rancière, as well as on Ankersmit's "substitution theory of representation,"[77] we can describe spectral performance as the embodied act of surrogation that makes what should be politically invisible visible while at the same time rendering what should be politically visible invisible. In other words, two substitutions take place here: on the one hand, the participants in the Regiment serve as substitutes for their deceased ancestors, who are miraculously "resurrected" by means of embodied surrogation; on the other, these same ancestors become substitutes for their living descendants in what amounts to a fantastical staging of a body politic that is entirely comprised of spectral subjects. This, of course, results in the widening of the aesthetic gap between the state and the people, who make themselves effectively invisible through a voluntary "civic action" that deprives them of representation. As anecdotal evidence of the Regiment's potential impact on the political franchise, we can cite the case of Alexander Ageev, a Russian politician and the Director of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who recently proposed granting voting rights to the 27 million Soviet citizens who perished in the Second World War. Asked how such a feat could be technically accomplished, Ageev responded that the votes could be cast by participants in the Immortal Regiment. He also added that, in the future, voting rights could be extended to other generations of dead Russians.[78]

74. Martín Plot, *The Aesthetico-Political: The Question of Democracy in Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière* (New York, 2014), 7.

75. Ibid., 9.

76. Ibid., 9.

77. Ankersmit contrasts the substitution theory of representation, according to which "it is the task of a 'representation' to function as a *substitute*, or *replacement* for a represented that is absent for whatever reason," to the resemblance theory of representation, according to which "resemblance determines whether a representation represents the represented," Ankersmit, *Historical Representation*, 222, 227.

78. See the following newspaper reports: "Glava instituta RAN predlozhil mertvym golosovat′ na vyborakh," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, May 20, 2016, at

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Toward a Necro-International

Walter Benjamin teaches us that we must fight the aestheticization of politics with the politicization of art. By way of conclusion, I would therefore like to examine an artistic response to the Immortal Regiment by the St. Petersburg artist and activist Maksim Evstropov, who offers a way to disrupt what Rancière would call "the distribution of the sensible" in Putin's Russia.[79]

A member of the recently "deceased" art group {rodina}—a funeral for the group was held in 2018—Evstropov was teaching philosophy at Tomsk State University when the first Immortal Regiment procession took place in that city in 2012. Troubled by a perceived lack of self-criticism on the part of the Regiment's organizers, Evstropov decided to create his own counter-initiative, which he called *Partiia mertvykh* (Party of the Dead). He has since staged dozens of public actions in which he and fellow Party members appear with their faces painted to look like the dead and holding up identical cutouts of human skulls that parody the photographs carried by participants in the Regiment (Figure 4). In addition, the participants carry signs with absurd or parodic slogans, poking fun at official language ("The Dead are More Numerous" and "Unity of the People in Death"), responding to political problems ("The Dead Don't Make War" and "Even the Dead Are Against Such Pension Reforms") or simply giving voice to the emotional state of Russian citizens ("What Russian does not Feel Dead?" and "Life is Hard, but, Thankfully, Short").[80] The group's actions take place on city streets, in parks, at protest marches, and, fittingly, in cemeteries. Photographs and videos of the actions are then disseminated on social media, helping to draw attention to the project and attract new members. In fact, much like the Regiment it parodies, the Party has begun to spread in copy-cat fashion to other cities in Russia and even abroad. This has led Evstropov to call for a more sweeping movement that would unite the dead the world over in a revolutionary *nekrointernatsional*.

In his public appearances and interviews, Evstropov describes his activity as an emancipatory necroactivism that aims to combat the oppressive bio- and necropolitical technologies of the state. While he is widely read in modern philosophy and theory, his main philosophical influences are evidently Foucault and Agamben. At the same time, Evstropov belongs to a distinct tradition within Russian actionism that includes the Necrorealism of

mk.ru/politics/2016/05/20/glava-instituta-ran-predlozhil-razreshit-mertvym-golosovat-na-vyborakh.html (accessed October 13, 2020) and "Professor iz RAN predlozhil dat' pravo golosa pogibshim v Velikoi Otechestvennoi," *Lenta.ru*, May 20, 2016, lenta.ru/news/2016/05/20/golosa/ (accessed October 13, 2020). Ageev's comments prompted Mikhail Epstein to characterize contemporary Russian state as a *necrocracy*—that is, a government for and by the dead. See Mikhail Epstein, "Necrokratiia," *Snob*, May 22, 2016, at snob.ru/profile/27356/blog/108729 (accessed October 13, 2020). It is important to place Ageev's words in the larger context of Russian electoral politics where disenfranchisement tactics like ballot stuffing and purging voter rolls have long been the norm.

79. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2004).

80. "Мёртвых больше," "Единство народа в смерти"; "Мёртвые не воюют," "Даже мёртвые против такой пенсионной реформы"; and "Какой россиянин не чувствует себя мертвецом?," "Жизнь трудна, но, к счастью, коротка."

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 4. Party of the Dead at a Labor Day rally in St. Petersburg. Photo: David Frenkel.

Yevgeny Yufit, Oleg Kulik's *Partiia zhivotnykh*, and the political art of Voina, Pussy Riot, and Pyotr Pavlensky. For all of their differences, these artists and theorists share an interest in the ways states and societies exert control over people's behaviors and bodies, and in finding new ways to resist (or at least expose) such control.[81] In Evstropov's works, these concerns are, in addition, tied to a critique of "necrophiliac" elements in Russian political culture, as exemplified by the Immortal Regiment.[82] Seeing such elements as a symptom of a resurgent fascism, he draws on western political theory—and especially on Agamben—to characterize the Russian political system itself as one that

81. On biopolitical themes in the works of these artists, see Alexei Yurchak, "Necro-Utopia: The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet," *Current Anthropology* 49, no. 2 (April 2008): 199–224; Gesine Drews-Sylla, "The Human Dog Oleg Kulik: Grotesque Post-Soviet Animalistic Performances," in Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson, eds., *Other Animals: Beyond the Human in Russian Culture* (Pittsburgh, 2010), 234–52; Alexander Etkind, "Talking about Russian Sex in the Era of Pussy Riot," *Slavonica* 18, no. 2 (2012): 105–7; and Andrey Makarychev and Sergey Medvedev, "Biopolitical Art and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Putin's Russia," in "Biopower At Europe's Eastern Margins: New Facets of a Research Agenda" a special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 26, no. 2–3 (2018): 165–79.

82. By "necrophilia," Evstropov does not mean sexual desire for the dead but rather a kind of "enchantment with death," which, he believes, is typical of fascism. See Maksim Evstropov, "Partiia mertvykh: sleva ili sprava?," *Sigma*, December 27, 2017, at https://syg.ma/@stenograme/partiia-miortvykh-slieva-ili-sprava (accessed October 13, 2020). On fascism and necrophilia, see also Ch. 13 of Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York, 1973) and Erich Fromm, *War within Man: A Psychological Enquiry into the Roots of Destructiveness* (Philadelphia, 1963).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has died and only simulates political life.[83] Agamben's writings also feature in his thinking about the condition of ordinary citizens in Putin's Russia. Deprived of political agency and representation, they increasingly resemble Agamben's *homo sacer*, reduced to a state of bare life that, from the political standpoint, is virtually indistinguishable from death.[84]

But if the Immortal Regiment only helps to reinforce this politics of death, how does Evstropov's Party of the Dead seek to oppose it? The main rhetorical device used by Evstropov is that of overidentification with the dominant discourses of power, particularly the "necrophiliac" discourses that have become a feature of Russian political life. The move is similar to the one employed by the groups and artists examined by Yurchak in his influential study of the last Soviet generation. According to Yurchak, a new form of ironic discourse called *stiob* emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, which "required such a degree of *overidentification* with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two."[85] Groups like the Necrorealists and the Mit′ki used *stiob* to create zones of indistinction within the reigning symbolic order, "decontextualizing" and "deterritorializing" it from within. The same may be said of Evstropov's actions; and the connection seems all the more fitting given Yurchak's definition of *stiob* as a form of "dead irony." Unlike the late Soviet practitioners of *stiob* examined by Yurchak, however, who "avoided any political or social concerns," Evstropov uses it for pointedly political ends. As he admits, the Party of the Dead is, at heart, "an ethical and political project which only masquerades as an artistic one."[86] It mimics and decontextualizes dominant discourses and practices, but with the aim of subjecting them to critical scrutiny.

The problem of representation is central to Evstropov's project. Noting the Kremlin's habit of speaking *for* the dead whenever it needs to prop up its own authority, he laments the fact that the dead themselves have no voice in Russia. Punning on Marx, as well as on Pavel Arsenyev's 2012 protest slogan *Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete* (You don't even represent us/You can't even imagine us), Evstropov notes: "Many have their own representation [*predstavitel′nost′*], or rather, they can be represented/imagined [*predstavlennost′*]: members of whatever opposition, sexual minorities, migrant workers, anyone who's among the living. But the dead are outside the field of visibility, no one can represent/imagine them [*ikh ne predstavliaet nikto*]."[87] This is so despite the fact that the dead comprise the largest social group, for, he

83. See, for instance, Giorgio Agamben, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living with Specters," in Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, 2011), 37–42.

84. In 2018, {rodina} even began to sell t-shirts with the words "HOMO SACER" printed in the same lettering as "OMON" (an acronym for *Otriad mobil′nyi osobogo naznacheniia*) on the uniforms of the Russian special police. In Cyrillic "OMON" ("ОМОН") looks like the Latin "HOMO" spelled backwards.

85. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 250.

86. Evstropov, "Partiia mertvykh: sleva ili sprava?"

87. The following quotes are transcribed from a YouTube video uploaded by Evstropov; see "maks evstropov o partii mertvykh," YouTube video, 2:40, posted by "{rodina}," August 8, 2017, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70G6ZQmzG7E&feature=youtu.be (accessed October 14, 2020). The slogan: "Вы нас даже не представляете."

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

observes, “there are 100 billion more dead people than living, and the more there are among the living, the more there will be among the dead.” Drawing on Agamben, Evstropov notes that the goal of his Party is to give voice to these figures of exclusion (*iskliuchennym*)—so totally excluded, in fact, that they exist “on the far side of identity.” Of course, Evstropov knows he has no more right to represent them than anyone else,[88] but, he contends, “if this inherently impossible goal is not achieved, our entire politics will remain the politics of exclusion.”[89] Thus the Party ironically mimics contemporary rituals of surrogation, but it does so in order to make visible what the Kremlin works actively to conceal. The dead are represented (*predstavleny*) not to deprive the living of political visibility but to help us imagine (*predstavit*′) a different politics: one grounded in the principles of *radical equality* (“among the dead there is no one who is more dead than the others”), *radical inclusion* (no one is excluded from dying), and *radical freedom* (for death “explodes every foundation and norm”).[90] “Vote for the Party of the Dead, for we are your future!” Evstropov enjoins his listeners—his words at once an ironic commentary on the morbid state of affairs in Russia and a refreshing departure from the Kremlin’s preoccupation with the past.

Our inability to determine the sincerity of this summons distinguishes Evstropov’s work from that of an artist like Pyotr Pavlensky, whose actions otherwise share a strategic affinity with Evstropov’s in that both challenge the present biopolitical order by paradoxically embracing the condition of bare life.[91] Another important difference is the manifestly non-heroic pathos of his project. Surveying examples of cultural resistance in Russia after 2010, Il′ia Kukulin has drawn a distinction between “heroic” forms of resistance addressed to the whole society and “non-heroic” forms addressed to an unknown private addressee.[92] Because heroic artists like Pavlensky employ loudly transgressive actions that address everyone with the dictum, “you must change your life,” Kukulin observes that they reproduce “the old model in which an artist is a special, isolated figure living in compliance only with his or her own rules. Their art does not presume dialogue with

88. As he observes, “It is impossible to represent the dead—no living man is suited for the role of being such a representative,” ibid.

89. Evstropov, “Partiia mertvykh: Sleva ili sprava?” Note that the word *iskliuchenie*, which I translate here as “exclusion,” is used by the Russian translators of Agamben to render the German Ausnahme (exception).

90. The Party’s Draft Charter was announced on Facebook on May 10, 2019. See “The Party of the Dead—Draft Charter,” Facebook post, posted by “Partiia mertvykh,” May 10, 2019, at facebook.com/notes/партия-мёртвых/the-party-of-the-dead-draft-charter/2475493615803663/ (accessed October 14, 2020).

91. On Pavlensky as a *homo sacer*, see Makarychev and Medvedev, “Biopolitical Art and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Putin’s Russia.” In adopting this strategy, both Evstropov and Pavlensky follow Agamben, who concludes *Homo Sacer* with the enigmatic assertion that “[the] biopolitical body that is bare life must itself be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoē*,” *Homo Sacer*, 188. For a useful explanation of this statement, see Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, 2014), 120–24.

92. Il′ia Kukulin, “Cultural Shifts in Russia since 2010: Messianic Cynicism and Paradigms of Artistic Resistance,” *Russian Literature* 96–98 (February–May 2018), 235.

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spectators."[93] By contrast, Kukulin notes that non-heroic forms of resistance like Artiom Loskutov's Monstrations—and, I would argue, Evstropov's Party of the Dead—use absurdity and irony to "open up one possibility for the non-aggressive destruction of habitual scenarios of communication and provoke the emergence of new metaphors, new 'protocols of communication.'"[94] Such non-heroic forms of resistance may be particularly effective at a time when transgression itself is being increasingly appropriated by the Russian state as it seeks to elaborate a new "aesthetics of emergency" that makes "extraordinary situations seem routine."[95] When transgression is used to reinforce the separation of "the people" into the "moral majority," on the one hand, and variously conceived "deviations," on the other, the largely anonymous members of the Party of the Dead not only offer a less vertical model of cultural resistance but also remind those willing to hear their "quiet" actions that "we are all virtually [that is, potentially] *homines sacri*."[96]

At the end of the day, the Party's activities ring like *memento mori* that clash loudly with the Kremlin's immortality discourse. That this message—more Stoic than Camaldolite—is addressed not only to the public but also to those in power is best exemplified by a controversial artwork by {rodina} in which the Russian president is portrayed in nine stages of decomposition (Figure 5). Inspired by a nineteenth-century drawing by the Japanese artist Kobayashi Eitaku entitled "Body of a Courtesan in Nine Stages," "Nine Stages of the Decomposition of the Leader" is itself a performance of sorts since its creation unfolded over time with the help of grass planted under Putin's official portrait.[97] Unlike the spectral performances which I have examined, however, this "domestic action" explicitly denies the possibility of resurrection, instead subjecting the sovereign's body to the process of slow, yet inevitable, decay. And yet, as Evstropov explains, the work has a double meaning. On the one hand, it expresses hope in gradual change by means of numerous "small deeds" (those wrought by the process of decomposition). On the other, it captures the despondency felt by many in the art/activist community during Putin's fourth presidential term. As he observes: "There is no need to wait for the revolution, hope in change is no longer tied to any human action—the only thing that gives us hope is the natural and 'inhuman' processes of aging, decay, dispersal, and disintegration."[98] Like the Party of the Dead, this work

93. Ibid., 236.

94. Ibid., 237.

95. Ibid., 231.

96. Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 115.

97. During a Labor Day march in St. Petersburg on May 1, 2018, the activist Varia Mikhailova was arrested while carrying the original art work. A Petersburg court later fined her 160,000 rubles and ruled that the work must be destroyed, which did not prevent the dissemination of copies both online and in print. See "V Peterburge aktivistku oshtrafovali 160 tysiach rublei za uchastie v pervomaiskom shestvii s plakatom 'Deviat' stadii razlozheniia vozhdia,'" *Meduza*, June 8, 2018, at meduza.io/news/2018/06/08/v-peterburge-aktivistku-oshtrafovali-na-160-tysyach-rubley-za-uchastie-v-pervomayskom-shestvii-s-plakatom-devyat-stadiy-razlozheniya-vozhdya (accessed October 14, 2020).

98. In a similar vein, mock graves to Putin have recently been erected in public places all over Russia as part of an anonymous necroactivist flash mob. See "For More

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 5. "Nine Stages of the Decomposition of the Leader" by Maksim Evstropov.

is thus ultimately an expression of "dead irony": "Hope for Russia lies not in people, but in grass."[99]

than a Month, Mock Graves for Putin Have Been Popping up around Russia. We Talked to an Activist Leader about Where They Came from," *Meduza*, April 23, 2019, at meduza.io/en/feature/2019/04/23/for-more-than-a-month-mock-graves-for-putin-have-been-popping-up-around-russia-we-talked-to-an-activist-leader-about-where-they-came-from (accessed October 14, 2020).

99. "9 stadii razlozheniia vozhdia," LiveJournal post, June 14, 2018, posted by "stropov," at stropov.livejournal.com/90807.html (accessed October 14, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.6 Published online by Cambridge University Press