6 Revolution

> We were all participants in a broad liberation movement ... a new humanism for the twenty-first century (*B*4).

> It's a well-known formula: romantics make revolutions and their fruits are appropriated by completely different people (*D*3).

> Gorbachev tried honesty and probity. Gorbachev tried. And what was the result? El'tsin handed over the country to the devil's mother (*A*4).

Between Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the Belovezh Accords that sundered the USSR, Russia experienced a political revolution. The new state almost immediately instituted a set of policies that extended this revolution to economy and society, transforming the country in a few years in ways scarcely imaginable less than a decade earlier. This chapter focuses on the characterizations of those events reflected in the consciousness of the country's political class roughly a decade later. How do they recall this revolution? What features has it acquired (or shed) with respect to situating in memory its foundational significance for a young country born of an old civilization and culture?

Interestingly, although the interview prompts did not include the term "revolution," some twenty respondents nonetheless used that word in one way or another to describe the events just mentioned. In a number of instances, it popped up in their replies to the final question that they were asked concerning their relations then and now to the events of August 1991 (the failed Soviet *coup d'état* and the resistance to it) and the Belovezh Accords concluded in the following December.[1] But subjects also introduced the term

[1] The final item in that prompt, which concerns the events of autumn 1999, the period of Putin's rise to power, attracted surprisingly little comment and is, therefore, not included here.

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themselves while commenting on a variety of other topics. It is, of course, worth recalling that the interview sample on which this study is based by no means includes all of the forces contending on Russia's political field. Rather, it consists of those who in one way or another supported the general ideas informing the revolution, if not always the specific forms that it eventually took. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of respondents had been participants in the revolution itself, whether on the barricades, the floors of meeting halls and legislatures, or the corridors of state power. Their remembrances and retrospective characterizations vary considerably, often in categorical disagreement with one another. In many cases, their assessments of seminal events cluster around the cognitive networks with which they have been associated. But not always.

The interview narratives evince enough dissension on fundamental issues related to Russia's recent revolution to discourage any interpretive effort based on first facts. Respondents simply do not agree on: (1) when the revolution began; (2) when it ended; (3) what it was about; (4) whether, and to what extent, its objectives were met; and (5) what it has meant for the country's future. Moreover, its key dimensions – political liberation and socioeconomic transformation – are so bitterly contested in their accounts that it would seem that there is no harmonious, much less singular, collection of memories within the political class constituting this revolution as a specific set of acknowledged events. For that class itself, it would seem, there is not one revolution but several.[2]

A counterfactual deserves mention in this respect; namely, the absence of any national commemoration of Russia's late revolution. That absence would seem to have great signicance for the founding of a new state, connoting an ellipsis in the collective life of the nation, its identity and its sense of time and space (Connerton, 1989). To be sure,

[2] The extreme case here would be represented by one respondent (*A*2) who reversed a conception common to others that the revolution was initiated in the *perestroika* period. In his view, *perestroika* was an attempt to call off the continuing Revolution of 1917 in order to reach a compromise with society.

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there were gatherings and a rock concert to celebrate the first anniversary of the defeat of the August coup, just as another rock concert was staged in Moscow on the tenth anniversary of that event. Otherwise – and despite some official efforts to promote commemoration (Smith, 2002: Urban, 1998) – there has been effectively nothing, and this in a country in which remembrance of things past represents a highly honored tradition (Clark, 1995). How to account for dissension among those in the political class on the issue of what happened, and for the blank spot in society's collective remembrance of the revolution?

I approach these two issues by taking the individual dimensions of Russian political discourse, discussed separately in the preceding chapters, and applying them in concert to the interview narratives. In so doing, I wish to show how their particular configuration in the discourse – discussed to this point somewhat thematically – functions as a whole to generate various narrative programs addressed to the specific topic of revolution. As demonstrated above, the dimensions of morality and competence are salient while those of community and approval are either muted or absent altogether. This condition, I intend to show here, militates against common conceptions and leads to rigid position-taking among participants. Position-taking, in turn, is structured by two binaries derived from the two active elements in the discourse: fate/agency, which is derived from "competence"; and romance/anti-romance, which issues from "morality." Respondents weave the elements and the binaries together in complex ways that establish the various positions that they take on the field of political communication.

In order to illustrate this process, consider the five examples set out in Table 6.1. Each is bordered on the left-hand margin by abbreviations for the two relevant discourse elements, represented either in the positive (competent, moral) or the negative (incompetent, immoral), followed by the binary structures (fate/agency and romance/anti-romance) active in the respective statements that follow. The statements themselves are paraphrases of numerous comments made by subjects on the topic of revolution. They

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Table 6.1 *Five permutations of discourse elements and binary structures in narratives on revolution*

Discourse elements: C = Competence (positive and negative). M = Morality (positive and negative).

1. C +, M +, *a*, *ro* We, the revolutionaries, were able to recognize the real situation and to take actions that prevented catastrophe.
2. C +, M +, *f* Although we did what was needed to be done, the revolutionary situation in which we acted involved unforeseeable consequences.
3. C –, M +, *a*, *ar* We were motivated by the highest ideals but didn't appreciate that others would use the opportunities that we created to enrich themselves.
4. C –, *a* They acted out of ignorance and this led to calamity.
5. M –, *a*, *ar* Their greed for power and money led the country to ruin.

represent effectively all positions on this topic taken by members of the sample.

The first row in Table 6.1 contains a statement that combines competence and morality. The speaker claims the ability to have recognized what needed to be done, to have done it, and thereby to have achieved a beneficial result. It also activates both sides of the fate/agency binary by implying a set of objective circumstances (fate) which has been recognized and dealt with (agency). Finally, the element of romance is contained in the reference to extraordinary people, revolutionaries, steering things toward a happy ending. In the second statement, however, competence and morality are combined in a different fashion, owing to the way in which fate is deployed: a "revolutionary situation" producing consequences that are negatively marked but which absolve the speaker of agency causing immorality. The third statement invokes agency and romance – "motivated by the highest ideals" – but introduces competence or, more precisely, its lack, as exculpation for moral consequences. This pairing of morality and (in)competence yields anti-romance, a category conditioned by the

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implicit presence of a villain ("others") acting immorally. The fourth statement is accusatory, affixing responsibility by reference to agency (it happened because they did it) while simultaneously impugning the competence of the agents. The final statement is constructed by affirming agency – but not necessarily competence – and by denying morality, thus summoning the category "anti-romance."

As varied and opposed as these statements appear to be, it should be emphasized that they all partake of a single political discourse. That is, each statement is constructed from out of the same collection of root terms, even while it might reverse the valence of those terms and combine them in ways that differ from those present in other assertions. Taken together, the elementary terms, when activated in specific narratives, yield a single field of political communication on which speakers take their respective positions. The following section examines the discursive strategies of the subjects yielding those positions on the topic of political revolution, while the one that succeeds it repeats that examination with a focus on the ensuing socioeconomic transformation.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE RUSSIAN STATE

A sizeable contingent of respondents used notions of things objective and inevitable to account for Russia's revolution, thus invoking the fate/agency binary by underscoring its first term. One responded to what he anticipated to be my objection to his comment that the collapse of the Soviet Union transpired "objectively" by retorting that

> No, this is not difficult [to understand] it is absolutely [the case]. The Union was absolutely doomed ... As soon as the clamps were weakened. Either there would be a totalitarian regime or none whatsoever. There was no middle ground. As soon as fear disappears, freedom arises (*B6*).

Another responded that:

> The USSR was objectively unmanageable: it was too large a country, with too many nations [in it], too many religions, too

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> much of all that might have a chance to exist as a unified whole only with a totalitarian regime [holding it together] (*A*1).

Similarly, a third remarked that, concerning the collapse of the USSR, he saw "the centrifugal forces as, well, absolutely inescapable ... as an expected inevitability" (B3).

In distinction from the mechanistic metaphors informing these remarks – all three of which reference some mechanism no longer able to hold the parts together – a fourth respondent used a biological one. Referring to how the defeat of the 1991 August putsch led directly to the extinction of the USSR, he commented that:

> the putsch showed that our society had an incurable disease. Politically it was a Chernobyl – that is, radiation that penetrated the brain, the will and all the pores of the social organism. Therefore, the August events helped me to work out the concept of political radiation. The ways in which state, society and the life of the individual are organized ... represent their particular fate. [Political] radiation is continuously needed to heal it (*B*4).

Along with these characterizations, five other individuals in the sample attributed the collapse of the USSR, and thus the origins of the contemporary Russian state, to inescapable, impersonal and objective factors (*B*9, *B*10, *C*3, *E*2 and *E*5), although two of them thought it nonetheless a tragedy (*B*9, *E*5). Others, apparently more positively disposed toward the USSR's extinction, introduced a human element into their assessments. One cited Vladimir Putin's characterization that the USSR's end amounted to a "civilized divorce" (*E*1). Another similarly maintained that in the face of the fact that "all of the [union] republics were scattering and unprepared to sign [a new treaty on the union], this was the practically moral thing to do" (*B*5). Two others introduced the counterfactual of violence and bloodshed (*B*8 and *C*5). As one put it:

> I think that a responsible decision was taken. If you ask yourself why did the train of events in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia

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> proceed along different tracks, why in Yugoslavia there was bloody porridge and on the post-Soviet expanse there were many unpleasant things but nothing like that, and if you want an answer in one sentence, then I will tell you that it was because we signed the Belovezh Accords (*B*8).

In sharp contrast to these characterizations, some thirteen members of the sample took the position that human hand lay behind the USSR's disintegration and evaluated that event negatively. In this respect, the five contingents of respondents map very closely onto the positions taken regarding this event. As expected, those from the first and second El'tsin administrations – two of whom participated directly in signing the Belovezh Accords – were most favorably inclined toward the result. Two from those groups did register their disapproval of what had occurred, but they were peripheral members of these cohorts (*B*1, *C*4). Those outside the two El'tsin groups, however, took very strong exception. The harshest remonstrations from members of these groups labeled Russia's signators to the Belovezh Accords "criminals" (*E*4) and "traitors."

- It was treason, treason for the sake of power. They got together, drank champagne and [someone said] "I'll telephone [then US president] Bush." Understand? You know how gratifying is self-esteem – "Here we are the ones who have torn down the Soviet Union!" Even Bush himself was surprised (*A*4).
- In the final analysis, it was a crime. At the time I wasn't a harsh critic, and all the same I then couldn't have been because I was on El'tsin's side or because I was insufficiently aware that this was the destruction of the country and such a tragedy for the Russians who remained beyond our borders. It was an adventure ending in a huge tragedy for many, many millions of people (*D*2).
- In November [1991] I was conversing with [Nursultan] Nazarbaev [president of Kazakhstan – M. U.]. He told me that there were chances to preserve the USSR, but El'tsin was categorically opposed to it. He [El'tsin] wanted the Kremlin, not the country, and was absolutely

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> uninterested in legitimacy, in democracy. And the Belovezh Accords were ratified not only by the liberal-democrats but by the communists. There was not a single party here which stood for right and for law (*A*5).

These remarks – underscoring treason and criminality – invert the terms of competence and morality while emphasizing the element of agency. According to their subtext, evil people get together to perpetrate evil. The inversion of competence and morality is particularly pronounced in the first statement where the phrase, "drank champagne," simultaneously signifies both a celebration of evil-doing and – because it obliquely references broad background understandings in Russia that the principal signators of the Accords were at the time inebriated – an outright surrender of mental faculties.

Respondents rarely drew on a discourse of community to address the matter of a Russian state emerging from the ruins of the USSR. When they did, it was coupled with that of morality. However, just whom the community included and what moral purpose was served were subject to contention. This was true even for those in the same cohort, as in the case of two members of Yabloko who linked community and morality – here signified by "democracy" – in opposing ways. One said that he had

> voted for the Belovezh Accords in the Supreme Soviet, but overall that was a mistake because the collapse of the USSR was for me a political and personal tragedy. I should have abstained. But reflecting on it over and over I think that what happened was unavoidable . . . We couldn't hold on to the Baltic states and Georgia without shedding a lot of blood. But we probably could have held on to Central Asia. But the course of my thoughts has led me to recognize the regimes remaining there, such as Turkmenbashi [then president of Turkmenistan – M. U.] . . . Well, what if Turkmenistan had remained in Russia? He would have installed the same regime

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> there that exists today and would have exerted colossal pressure on Moscow, on the central authorities. So I think that maybe it was better that these [Central Asian] republics were pulled away from us (*D*7).

One of his colleagues took just the opposite approach to the issue of democracy and community, arguing that he had wanted

> all of the Soviet Union to become a democratic country . . . I thought that Russia, which had dragged all the others into communism, bore responsibility for gradually building democracy in the entire country. That's all there is to it . . . The economic treaty creating a single market for a new union had already been signed and it was destroyed in the Belovezh woods. I knew that that would lead to very big difficulties but, more, I wanted the whole country to become democratic (*D*6).

Alongside these remarks about community in the abstract – Whom might it or should it include? – numerous subjects underscore the sad consequences for communities in the flesh: families now divided by state borders; Russian populations in other of the former union republics who would face discrimination and worse. Yet whether referring to the abstract or the concrete, all references to community in the context of the USSR's breakup frame "community" in passive terms. Consistent with the discussion in Chapter 3, "community" functions in Russian political discourse as the recipient of benefits bestowed by the political class – as references to the prevention of bloodletting, above, would indicate – or as an impoverished, neglected or abused entity supplying political actors with reason to blame others for criminal or traitorous deeds. Yet "community" itself displays no agency in these narratives. No respondent remarked on what the people did: what they approved, what they wanted, what they opposed. Of course, what they did may have been little or nothing at all. The point, however, is that within the discourse they do not seem to be expected to do anything.

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Finally, with respect to the disintegration of the USSR, a discourse of competence was employed by a few respondents who grafted it onto those of morality and community. Some – especially two in the sample who participated directly in the meeting where the Accords were concluded – categorically insisted that the statecraft displayed at Belovezh rescued Russia from an otherwise sanguinary fate. Others, however, took the opposite view. For instance, the comments of *A*5 about right and law, above, suggest a failure on the part of all political forces to apprehend a decisive political moment and to act accordingly. Another respondent recalled that as advisor to a four-member fraction of deputies in the Supreme Soviet, he had persuaded them to join two others to vote against the Accords, thus implying that the vast majority of Russia's legislators did not display the competence to check "collusion at the top" or consider the real consequences of their actions (*C*4). A third respondent argued that the demise of the USSR could have been at least delayed for a very long time were the political class capable of recognizing realities (*D*1), while a fourth remarked that once in power in the Russian Republic, the El'tsin administration was witness to

> the appointment of extremely incompetent, utterly unthinking people to the most important posts. Their behavior during the August putsch had already made this clear to me. Of course, they achieved victory then, but a victory over an absolutely incapable opponent which got them accustomed to thinking that everything is just that easy. They were not prepared to deal with the country's real problems. And so, when it came to the Belovezh Accords, they wanted just to get something done as quickly as possible, not thinking of the cost or consequences, just, "Hurrah! We've solved the major problems." They lost their own country and no one thought about that (*D*4).

Given the enormity of the events in question and whether or not respondents participated in them, it is not surprising that the narratives occasioned by the prompt to assess the Belovezh Accords

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are as polarized as they are. However, some fifteen years after the fact, respondents resort almost exclusively to strong signifiers – whether, on one hand, praising the principals for saving the country from a blood bath or, on the other, condemning them as criminals and traitors – which indicate the semiotic load borne by the moral dimension of Russian political discourse. The same appears to be true for the category, competence. The principals in this case are described as either masters of statecraft or as irresponsible, "utterly unthinking" people. Thus, it is not merely the division obtaining among respondents with respect to this issue but its depth that invites comment. It would seem that the unbridgeable divide evinced here is contingent upon the relative absence of a recognized community, and, consequently, upon speakers' ability to reference a discourse of approval. In that absence, subjects construct themselves on the issue of the origin of their state by using the categories available to them: morality and competence. In so doing, they draw black-and-white distinctions: either statesmen acting on moral grounds achieved an optimal result by terminating the existence of the Soviet Union, or fools with no sense of moral responsibility perpetrated a treacherous crime. Thus, in the origins of their state, Russia's political class appears to be sharply divided into exponents of approbation and opprobrium.

SOCIOECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

In the same way that narratives of approbation and opprobrium regarding the origins of the Russian state are informed by discourses of morality and competence, so respondents drawing on these same discourses to address the matter of Russia's ensuing socioeconomic transformation divide themselves into two opposing groups: some argue that the rapid installation of capitalism represented an optimal response to objective circumstances, thus rescuing the country from great misfortune; others claim that the actual measures carried out were misguided, amateurish and, for some, larcenous, thus pitching the country into calamity. Here, the binary of fate/agency

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underpinning narratives regarding the USSR's termination appears again in the interview texts. In commenting on the country's internal transformation, the second binary – romance/anti-romance – also surfaces. Both binaries, however, allow for considerable variation in the way in which signifiers are deployed.

To illustrate, take for example the use of the word "Bolshevik." This word had been a seminal marker in the discourse of the Soviet regime, a pivotal part of the master tale that it propagated in all media, identifying citizens according to their receptivity to, and facility with, retelling the tale of proletarian revolution, the vanquishing of class enemies, the inauguration of the first socialist state, and so on (Bourmeyster, 1983). Within the confines of Soviet discourse, "Bolshevik" conveyed the romance of the regime's version of the 1917 Revolution. It stood for only the most admirable qualities – selflessness, unswerving dedication, intellectual brilliance and unshakeable courage – placed in service to the cause of all humanity. During the country's more recent revolution, however, this same term's valence was reversed by anti-communist forces who used it as verbal artillery in their assault on the Soviet party-state. In their discourse, "Bolshevik" was associated with adjectives such as "dogmatic," "ruthless," "mendacious" and "murderous," thus impugning the foundational myths of the order that they sought to overthrow. Although "Bolshevik" was seldom used by respondents in the present study, its appearance in the narratives of two of them indicates how specific terms can take on a penumbra of meaning and thus function as empty signifiers, in this instance, both negatively and ironically. One member of the sample – himself a former career official in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with Politburo rank – castigated the "democrats" who had come to power in communism's wake as "barbarous" and "lawless" hotheads who had betrayed democracy itself. He thus named them "Bolsheviks, but inside-out" (*A*4). A member of that same government excoriated by this respondent, appropriated the very same term, "Bolsheviks," for himself and his colleagues, thus

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ironically returning the word's meaning to something like the one that it had had in Soviet times (*B9*).[3]

Mindful of this possibility for signifiers "to float" – that is, to be used simultaneously by those on contending sides of a political conflict who supply them with different, even opposing, meanings (Laclau, 2005), I would like to review the interview narratives addressed to the social and economic aspects of Russia's anti-communist revolution, situating signifiers within the structure of the discourses in which they appear. In so doing, my purpose is twofold: (1) to distinguish analytically those signifiers anchored in the agency/fate binary from those based on the couple, romance/anti-romance; and (2) to disentangle the intertwined discourses of morality, competence and community reflected in the interview narratives. Consistent with that approach, my aim is to locate those root discursive categories through which political actors articulate their sense of the world and their roles within it.

The fate/agency binary. The interview narratives – as the example above concerning the usage of the term "Bolshevik" might suggest – in many instances evince a blurring of significance, a crossing of semantic boundaries, even a reversal of meanings. The notions of agency, as subjects producing results, and fate, as objective conditions impervious to human device, are in like manner both opposed and conjoined in respondents' remarks, producing certain permutations and qualifications on the surface level of narrative that resist interpretation in the absence of their discursive context. With that in mind, I shall review the relevance of these structuring terms by taking first their more straightforward expressions in respondents' narratives, moving then to the more complex ways in which they were used. I begin with "fate."

The most direct expression of the category "fate" in respondents' statements took the form of "no alternative." This mode of

[3] To extend the (positive) analogy, this respondent used the term employed by the Bolsheviks for members of the government apparatus that they inherited – i.e., "bourgeois specialists" – to refer to Soviet officialdom that he was obliged to direct once having entered the government.

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characterization had been employed during *perestroika*, and was used by both Gorbachev (1987) and members of the liberal intelligentsia (Afanas′ev, 1988) as a basis for advancing radical solutions to problems regarded as endemic to the Soviet system. Some twenty years later, this same notion of inescapable objectivity surfaced in the narratives of a few interview subjects who remarked that

- We [in the government instituting the economic reforms] did that which we considered to be absolutely necessary, and perhaps there simply were not any alternatives to the decisions that we took. But it is necessary to understand that many of the decisions that you take can later be used against you by others (*B*9).
- I think that as a matter of fact there were no alternatives to that group [of reformers], which is why they came to power (*B*7).
- I was leading the government and I had to secure things so that we [the country] could last until [the next] harvest and thus would not have to endure a famine like the one that occurred in 1918 (*B*8).

The third set of remarks above displays in concentrated form the associations made in interview narratives among fate, agency, morality and competence. Here, grasping the objective situation implies the competence to recognize fate, while activating that consciousness by means of beneficial policy measures secures the moral outcome of rescuing the country from famine. This same subject connected these categories in another respect remarking that:

> In November 1991, when the condition of the Soviet economy was absolutely catastrophic, I was invited to head up de facto the economics sector in the Russian government. We had prepared a satisfactorily comprehensive plan of action for what needed to be done in order to conduct reanimating measures to rebuild [the economy] from its ruins (*B*8).

Here, the metaphors of reanimation and ruins convey the notion of objective conditions associated with fate, while preparing a "comprehensive plan of action" speaks to the issues of agency and competence.

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These metaphors appear not infrequently in the comments of members of the team of economists setting policy in the first El'tsin administration, just as they do among those of others in both El'tsin-era cohorts. However, outside of the economic reform team itself, evaluations of agency could differ even while the context would be objectified by the trope "reanimation." As one respondent from the second El'tsin administration remarked in reference to the team of reformers:

> Imagine the following situation: they were trying to revive a sick man but as a matter of fact this person was already clinically dead. So here we are not talking about a program that might make a healthy human being more healthy; rather, we are talking about how to bring an organism back to life. So, they administered adrenaline to the heart, gave a massage, administered electric shock. It might be possible to call such measures a program, but these were actually emergency measures to restore an organism to life ... They didn't have any kind of detailed program that they had worked out (*C*3).

Noteworthy here would be the fact that this interview subject uses the very language of fate and agency – reanimation of a corpse by means of shock therapy – that the reform team employs to describe their situation and actions. However, while sharing in their metaphoric construction of conditions facing the government at the time, *C*3 also subtracts from their actions a large measure of competence. In this respect, his assessment appears to shade into that of many in other cohorts who lambaste the team of reformers for ineptitude. Yet his narrative dovetails with that of the reformers in their common recognition of fate, a recognition supplied by the substitution of a medical metaphor for economic terms, proper (Verdery, 1996). Respondents who did not participate in that metaphoric construction thus took a far dimmer view of this team and their actions, producing accusatory narratives drawing on the discourses of morality as well as competence.

With respect to the discourse of competence, perhaps the most blistering and sustained critique was submitted by one interview

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subject who had himself been a somewhat peripheral member of the reform team. His words are worth quoting at length.

> I don't know what to say about my time in the Gaidar government. In principle, I had good relations with Gaidar, but that period in government was the most unpleasant in my life . . . I had a background in bankruptcy – which was essentially what privatization was about in my country. I had lived and worked in the USA. Therefore, I noticed in the Gaidar government a deficit of knowledge. A big role in the formation of that government was played by a study group [*kruzhok*] in economics that began meeting toward the end of the 1980s. I was not a participant. But when the reforms were conducted, the experiences from that group proved more important than those of actual, living people. They perceived market relations and private property to be the solution to all problems. They were excessively naïve . . . In 1990, Jeffrey Sachs appeared in Moscow and so did the firm, Goldman Sachs. I had to explain to a whole bunch of well-known political actors that they were not half-brothers as some of them had thought. The level of understanding of capitalism was completely nil. All their knowledge had come from [Soviet] textbooks. They had never lived under capitalism as I had, nor at that time could most of those instituting the reforms read English well enough to comprehend complex economic texts. No one had a Western education. This had a very strong effect on things (*B*1).[4]

[4] Facility with the English language seems to play no small role in assessments of competence among some in the sample, perhaps signifying one's place in the world order – and here terms such as the "civilized" or the "normal" countries are used as markers of association with the West – that seems to matter greatly in contemporary Russian culture (Boym, 2001: Lemon, 2000). Thus, whereas *B*1 reports in his criticism of others on the reform team their deficit of skills in that tongue, *B*9 insists that: "I remember the first discussions in Europe with the International Monetary Fund. We conducted them in English. Well, because there are always translators, this is not so important. But I speak about it [to indicate] the level of education among those who were then in power" (*B*9). The accuracy of these conflicting assessments is in the present context far less significant than is the fact that this form of cultural capital – ability in the English language – occupies such a prominent place in the outlook of the economic reform team.

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This assessment of the competence of the reformers in government was shared by members of the Yabloko contingent in the sample. But, as discussed in Chapter 4, their narratives reflected in almost equal measure a discourse of morality impugning the results of, if not always the intentions behind, the actions of the reformers. Putin-era respondents, on the other hand, said very little about these things, except to castigate the reformers for weakening the Russian state and for doing the bidding of foreign powers (*E*3, *E*4). Interestingly, those in the Gorbachev-era cohort in this instance most resembled the Yabloko group in their assessments, employing the discourses of competence and morality. Here is a sample of their remarks:

- The mistake [of the reformers] was both to neglect Russia's history and to think up anything new. They just took the European code as a cultural-political model to follow. As they understood it, it meant a return to private property, a redistribution of basic resources, of the productive bases of the country's own might. To place those resources in private hands. But the important political question was: *Into whose hands*? How do they decide what to do with them? To buy [the British football club] Chelsea?[5] To build dachas in Nice? To purchase yachts? But the use of these resources should have not been for the sake of a few to live better, but to modernize the country, to replace its technology . . . I think that our economic reformers [believed in] this mythology: If property belongs to private individuals, everything automatically goes well. They simply didn't know that property is not a thing but a system of relations (*A*2).
- What kind of principles did the El'tsin group display? None. "You get the oil and I'll take the gas," that's all. But the question arises: To what purpose will the oil be put? For the national interest or for Abramovich[6] to buy a yacht? . . . Shock therapy and privatization were

[5] The reference to the Chelsea Football Club concerns its scandalous purchase by a Russian, Roman Abramovich, who profited greatly from the reforms.

[6] Abramovich is the same individual referred to in the previous note.

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carried out immorally, not to build democracy or a market but just to enrich certain people or those close to them (*A*4).

- In my view, there was no need whatsoever to change the governing class [*nomenklatura*]. They were already de-ideologized. They were capable of administering the country . . . But the tragedy was that under the banner of democracy, real Bolsheviks came to power for whom power and money were more important than any democracy. Out of this came the shelling of the White House[7] and the end of Russian democracy. And now those same people complain about Putin. But there's no difference, absolutely none. The current system was formed when they adopted the 1993 Constitution, actually, an elected autocracy. You can't blame Putin for that! Recently I asked Irina Khakamada[8] about this and she said, "Sasha, you're right." Her liberals created this system for themselves, not thinking that it could ever be [put to use] by their opponents (*A*5).[9]

Romance/anti-romance. The last of the remarks just quoted touches on the binary "romance/anti-romance." It subverts a celebratory moment in the narratives of reformers in an "anti-romantic" way by implicating them in the demise of the very value, democracy, that they have claimed to promote. Others – both reformers and some of their critics – often endow their narratives with direct mention of "romance," lacing them in many instances with references to the heady atmosphere of the period in which they acted, conjuring and

[7] This reference is to El'tsin's 1993 *coup d'état* and the military assault on the opposition legislature, then ensconced in a building called the "White House" by Russians.

[8] At the time, Irina Khakamada was a leader of the Union of Right Forces, something of a political successor to that wing of the reform movement represented earlier in the Gaidar government.

[9] A member of the first El'tsin administration – who, as a longtime dissident in the Soviet period, belonged to a cognitive network quite different from that of the economic reformers – similarly remarked that "the transition from El'tsin to Putin was a natural regularity that began with the events of 1993 and 1996 [El'tsin's coup and subsequent re-election – M. U.]. The first democrats had already decided that everything was permissible, that they could use any instruments if only democracy would remain in power. In the final analysis, they played a cruel joke on themselves" (*B*2).

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speaking directly about a "romantic time," a "revolutionary time" (*C*2). In this respect, "romance" admits to two very different interpretations among members of the sample. In some instances, it is marked positively. Comparing it to the 2004–2005 mass political protests in Ukraine that brought down an illegitimate government, one respondent referred to the defeat of the August 1991 Soviet putsch as "our Orange Revolution" (*E*1). Another recalled that:

> Those three days and nights (19–21 August 1991 – M. U.) were some of the brightest in my life. I was at the White House day and night.[10] When I got news of the putsch, all that I had been hoping for seemed dashed. But when I saw my comrades, when I saw that we would resist and not give in, all my perplexity and bitterness passed. I understood that I was in a circle of people who would not lie down before what had happened . . . It was resistance that put me in a wonderful frame of mind (*D*7).

The defeat of the Soviet putsch represents for many in the sample the ground zero of Russia's revolution. Issuing from those events, the statehood of the country was secured and its social and economic transformation was made possible. Both appear in the narratives of those in the first El'tsin administration as seamlessly connected. In the words of one:

> In my own life I always perceived how difficult and torturous is the attempt to move the country from empire to freedom. Of course, I am immeasurably glad that in 1990, 1991 and 1992 I had a decisive influence on working out the principal ideas connected with reform, modernization and the transformation to a new Russia . . . We were all participants in a broad liberation movement, each in his own, irreplicable way. In the Greek *polis*, politics was perceived as the highest, most rewarding, most prestigious and

[10] At this time, the White House was the seat of the Russian government and central locus of the resistance to the Soviet putsch.

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> significant activity, in equal measure securing personal honor, personal dignity and serving the common good. I have no doubt that such an elevated sense of politics was inside us in the nineties . . . I still insist that the lessons of 1991 and Russia's contemporary possibilities enable the country to perform as, let's say, the active cultivator of a new humanism for the twenty-first century (*B*4).

Another respondent from the first El'tsin administration recalled how, in his field of foreign policy, revolutionary ideas brought himself and his colleague into conflict with all practitioners of conventional diplomacy, including his own superiors:

> I served as deputy to Sergei Kovalev, the former dissident who then directed the Human Rights Committee in the Duma and headed the Russian delegation to the International Commission on Human Rights. The most surprising thing for us in Geneva, the most startling thing, was that the old Soviet diplomats behaved exactly like the Americans, the English, the European Commission and so forth. We understood it – this was a single family who, of course, had their own nook, their own interests and their own rules for defending them . . . The adopting of resolutions was just buying and selling. Absolutely so. "You support me on this and I'll back you on that." But we were the revolutionaries of 1991 from the new Russia! We decided to knock all of that down. Naturally, this brought us into conflict with our own superiors whose arguments were absolutely understandable. They would say, for example, that "we have a 4,000-kilometer border with China. That's our neighbor, an influential, developing force" and so on. "We can't take [human rights] actions against them. That's not in the interest of the state." We would reply, "Why must we lie and defend them? Aren't we here for the purpose of *human rights*? On economic matters, please, go ahead and cooperate with them. But if the question concerns human rights, then we're just not going to neglect it." So, we argued with them, and never stopped (*B*2).

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The impasse suffered by revolutionary ideals in confrontation with hardened political realities was even more poignantly referenced by others in the sample. Wistfully, two of them summed up their experience with revolution and romance in these words:

- Like many others in politics in those days [the late 1980s and early 1990s], I was an idealist. While idealists built castles in the air, pragmatists privatized the present. It's a well-known formula: romantics make revolutions and their fruits are appropriated by completely different people (*D*3).
- In August 1991, I was with El'tsin's team in the White House from the first. I was morally prepared to give my life defending democracy, the principles of freedom and justice, from the totalitarian, perverse order that previously for some reason had been calling itself "communist." Now, like many of my colleagues who then participated in this, I am deeply disappointed. We expected something else. Maybe we had something of a romantic view of things that would occur after our victory. But that didn't happen. Those who came to power did not, in my view, have to conduct reforms that impoverished a large part of the population or conduct privatization that gave over natural monopolies to private hands (*D*5).

These remarks invoke anti-romance, the idea that some force has devalued the actions that individuals had taken on behalf of ideals that, at least previously, had been quite real to them. Anti-romance in this respect represents disillusion, the act of shedding what turned out to be false hope. This notion informs a rather standard narrative in Russian politics employed by those liberal-democrats who had gone into opposition to their opposite numbers in government, imprecating them for etiolating, if not destroying, the values of liberal democracy to which both groups lay claim. Indeed, similar remarks on that score are sprinkled throughout the preceding pages of this study. Liberals in government – as if in reply to these charges – offered a diverse array of comments in their defense, although they were never directly queried about such matters, thus suggesting that

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a narrative of apology is every bit as much an element in the country's political discourse as is that of accusation. One tack taken by the reformers reverses the valence of *B*1's remarks, quoted above, concerning the incestuous intellectual climate in the reform team that insulated its members from the world of practice and from the actual consequences of their actions. Rather than inbred thinking, two respondents proudly described their "team" as composed of *edinomyshlennikov* (*B*8, *B*9), a term that translates into English as "like-minded thinkers" but in Russian carries an even stronger sense of conformity, literally meaning something like "those of a single mind." In this usage, single-mindedness does not represent some fatal lack of sensitivity to things but – much like the signifier "Bolshevik" when deployed positively – a rare competence in service to morality.[11] Thus, between criticism and apology, there is no debate on this score. Those in the reform team all thought alike. Difference occurs only at the level of evaluation as to whether this was a good thing or not.

A second line of defense is set up by constructing "revolution" as a liminal time, a period in which people have been dislodged from the ordinary and thus a portal through which outsiders could enter politics (Horvath and Thomassen, 2008).

- Unconditionally, only in a romantic and revolutionary period could people such as myself get involved with high-level politics, as boys ready for battle who could pull the caftans from the fire. That's when El'tsin's circle got the idea to create a government out of proven fighters. [At first] we said, "Many thanks, but we can't bear responsibility and do anything serious in a government full of people without a program." So, for a long time – well not actually long, just a few days, for then time was flowing fast and slowly simultaneously – there was no government at all (*B*9).

[11] In the memoirs of this team's leader, the close relations within the team, along with their purported competence and morality, are rehearsed at some length (Gaidar, 1999).

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- The old regime fell against the backdrop of new [Russian] institutions that were still weak. These, as it were, were revolutionary times. Again, I'll emphasize what I've said many times, that I don't understand there to be anything romantic about a revolution. In general, a revolution is a horrible tragedy for any society, the consequence of a regime unable to solve those problems that might have been settled earlier in an altogether different way. During a revolution, new people are drawn to politics, people who in a normal political process . . . would never be found. They are brighter, sometimes not very well balanced, sometimes extremely nervous, often charismatic. They were too intelligent to participate in politics in normal times. Some were absolutely crazy (*B*8).
- In March 1989, I went into politics. The times then were revolutionary-romantic, when everything changed, when everything was different. It was some kind of historical watershed, a revolution, the collapse of communism, a time when things carried very great moral-ethical weight (*B*5).

Exculpation in these instances would seem to be purchased with the currency of fate, but in small denominations. Revolution is said to upset the normal order, producing a confusion which draws unusual actors, some of whom are "absolutely crazy," into politics. Disruption, then, can be expected to have some negative results. Those expectations are addressed in a third line of defense that invokes an exacting "price" to be paid for those consequences of a revolutionary situation beyond the capacity of the revolutionaries to prevent. They represent an aspect of fate that in this context absolves actors of both incompetence and immorality.

- In a revolution, power uses very strong incentives, such as murder or the threat of murder. That is, if you don't follow orders, you'll end up in an urn on the shelf; if you do, you'll be king. During such transformations, there is often some moral price to pay. For example, they complain now about the absence of trust in business. The absence of trust means that in government and in business short-term decision

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making predominates, short-term investments. This causes direct and enormous damage to the country. You have to pay this price for speed (*B7*).

- Any work in government subjects people to various temptations inasmuch as power inevitably gives some advantages that can be used. And many used them. Often there were cases in which great competence kept company with moral depravity. That's because such colossal social upheavals don't occur without exacting a price . . . When they say now that only thieves were in that [Gaidar's] government who pilfered everything – that's untrue. They were sincere and inspired people trying for success. But, of course, they couldn't last long. When a revolutionary situation arises, dishonesty and self-enrichment proliferate, independent of what we want or don't want (*C7*).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has analyzed interview narratives addressing the issue of Russia's anti-communist revolution by examining their general basis in the country's political discourse and by locating them in terms of two binary structures – fate/agency and romance/anti-romance – that appear to be activated in respondents' remarks on that topic. The grid set out in Table 6.2 provides a summary of the findings. It should be emphasized, in this respect, that because my purpose has been to trace narratives back to the discursive frames in which they appear, I am not engaged here with recording individual opinions or assessments of the topic at hand, much less with computing the relative frequency of their appearance across groups in the sample. By that measure, the picture presented in the table is by no means precise. Provided with a general prompt rather than asked about revolution per se, fourteen subjects did not use the term "revolution" at all. The remaining twenty, however, did so and chose to characterize it, and to amplify those characterizations in many cases, without prompt from the interviewer. Their comments, and those of others responding to the final interview question, suggest a common discourse structured by two identifiable binaries, even while dissension reigns among them.

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Table 6.2 *Positive (+) and negative (–) uses of discourse elements and binary structures concerning "revolution" across cohorts in the sample*

	Competence	Morality	Fate	Agency	Romance	Anti-romance
Gorbachev era	–	–	–*	+	–	+
First El'tsin administration	+*	+	+	+	+**	–
Second El'tsin administration	+***	+	+	+	+	–
Democratic opposition	–	–	–	+	+•	+
Putin era	–	–••	+	+	–	+

* There is one exception in this group.

** The single exception to this assessment in the first El'tsin administration would be B8, who claimed that he did not understand there to be anything "romantic about a revolution."

*** There are two mild exceptions among members of this group.

• The positive mention of "romance" by individuals in this group was invariably accompanied by expressions of disappointment, thus invoking the opposite side of the binary, "anti-romance."

•• The single exception in this group qualified his appraisal by calling the Accords "more a positive than a negative factor." He was especially critical of the competence and morality displayed by the government undertaking Russia's sociopolitical transformation.

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Although the entries in Table 6.2 do not concern what individual actors might themselves "believe" or "think," and mindful of the relative heterogeneity of membership within each cohort, the results reported, here, nonetheless indicate certain regularities in the sample with respect to how various groups draw on a common discourse to take differing positions on the field of political communication. Notable, in this respect, would be the near coincidence of assessments appearing in rows one and five. With a single exception on the fate/agency binary, those in the Gorbachev-era cohort characterize Russia's recent revolution in purely negative terms. They tend to portray it as the product of incompetent agency rather than as the result of objective factors. They impute immoral motives to those regarded as responsible for it and cite as evidence the revolution's calamitous consequences. Overall, those in the Putin-era cohort concur but insist that fate played a major role in Russia's statehood, arguing in most instances that the breakup of the USSR was unavoidable, perhaps suggesting the differing positions occupied by the Gorbachev group who "lost" their country, the USSR, as opposed to the Putin-era cohort who have come to power in, and thus "gained" a country, Russia. Both groups, however, refer to the economic reforms that followed as owing little, if anything, to objective factors and were undertaken rashly and without due regard to their actual results. These findings would reinforce those reported in the preceding chapter, indicating that, across generations, professional politicians in Russia seem to share common orientations toward the political, orientations that set them sharply apart from those displayed by their nemesis, professionals in politics.

Professionals in politics are represented in rows two, three and four. Within the first two, near-unanimity prevails; the valence of all discursive elements is positive. This pattern distinguishes the narratives of these sub-sets of professionals in politics from those of professional politicians in rows one and five. But at least equally it sets them apart from the democratic opposition (displayed in row four) for whom all discursive vectors point toward the negative.

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Professionals in politics comprise the ranks of this group, too, but they have not enjoyed the same position on the political field – namely, executive power – as have their counterparts in rows two and three. Thus, unsurprisingly, their narratives represent the mirror image of their liberal-democratic competitors who have held power and bear some responsibility for its use. They draw on a discourse of principled morality in order to establish a critical distance between themselves and the revolution's outcome, just as their liberal opponents – who otherwise speak this same language, as noted in the previous two chapters – tend to swerve away from it when addressing this particular topic, emphasizing fate over agency and necessity over moral principles. But it is also interesting to note in this respect how the narratives of the democratic opposition are based on the same discursive foundations as are those represented in rows one and five. Here, differences of substance appear to lie in the fact that those in the democratic opposition do not structure their remarks on revolution along the lines of "fate." Whereas those in the Putin-era cohort do so with respect to the disintegration of the USSR – thus confirming the inevitability, if not the legitimacy, of the state that they have come to govern – those in the democratic opposition tend to deny this and attribute that consequence only to incompetent and immoral agency. In this respect, their narratives resemble those in the Gorbachev group.

The narratives of the groups represented in rows one, four and five coincide on the socioeconomic aspects of Russia's transformation, albeit the invective displayed by those issuing from the Gorbachev-era cohort and the democratic opposition is not matched by those coming from the Putin-era group. The other difference distinguishing the narratives of the democratic opposition from both the Gorbachev-era and Putin-era cohorts concerns the romance/anti-romance binary. Whereas the last two groups reported no romantic attachment to the revolution, members of the democratic opposition who – unlike those in those very groups – consider themselves to have been direct participants in it, sometimes confess an

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involvement in this romance that led, ultimately, to the regret and disappointment associated with the other side of that binary.

The three epigrams placed at the head of this chapter represent in concentrated fashion the near-totality of positions taken by members of the sample on the question of Russia's recent revolution. In short, the messages are: it was great; it was a great disappointment; it was a great disaster. To be sure, those positions are inflected and amplified by the respondents in numerous ways: "it was great in spite of unanticipated shortcomings" and so forth. Some actually combine elements of one position with those of others. Yet those seem to be the principal positions all the same. Why? The argument here has been that within the structure of Russian political discourse, those are the positions available for taking on the field of communication. Because of the effective absence of a discourse of approval and a very stunted discourse of community, political actors almost exclusively rely on "competence" and "morality" in order to compose meaningful, intelligible utterances about the world of politics and their places in it. All, as it were, speak the same language in order to distinguish themselves and their cognitive networks not from anything so much as from one another.

These considerations supply some clues to the second puzzle under consideration here: Why has effectively no attention been paid to the public commemoration of Russia's recent revolution? One possible answer has been supplied by informant *C7* who has been quoted in Chapter 3 regarding the desirability of creating a national holiday to commemorate the defeat of the August 1991 putsch. He explained the absence of such a holiday as a consequence of the economic reform that followed which "destroyed the basic worlds of people, affecting their root, living interest." As plausible as it might be that mass material misery represents an unlikely support for political celebration, it would appear that this explanation is incomplete. A far greater degree of misery followed in the wake of the 1917 Revolution and massive commemorations nonetheless ensued.

Another possible answer would be provided by Richard Sakwa (2006) who has argued that post-communist revolutions have been

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both made and understood by political forces that had outgrown the notion of revolution as a dramatic rupture in time opening onto a utopian future. He claims that these more sober, anti-communist revolutions have been propelled by a different vision conveyed in the writings of those such as Havel (1985) and Michnik (1985) who intentionally blunted the revolutionary impulse in favor of a self-limiting program focused on the power of morality to transform social and political life, thus "transcending" revolution itself. To the extent that this is true, then, these revolutions would leave little ideational and emotional residue that could subsequently be employed in the service of commemoration and the marking of a new epoch. But however accurate this scenario might be for the countries of Eastern Europe, it does not seem to fit the Russian case particularly well. As noted above, political actors there still talk about revolution, still recall its romantic aspects and speak in the present about the revolutionary period as marked by a liminality including extraordinary circumstances, events and people. Moreover, anyone who experienced those three days of resistance in August 1991 likely came away with the feeling that something epochal had, indeed, occurred (Bonnell, Cooper and Freidin, 1994).

A third possible answer, specifically directed to the commemorative neglect of the August 1991 events in Russia comes from Kathleen Smith (2002). She makes a persuasive case for a failure to inaugurate a tradition of remembrance by noting that the polarization of political forces that occurred in reaction to the onset of the economic reform launched by the government in 1992 destroyed any would-be consensus on what should be celebrated and who should be doing the celebrating. Leaders of the resistance to the August putsch found themselves on opposite sides of the barricades in 1993 – some using artillery against their erstwhile comrades-in-arms who were ensconced in the same White House that they had defended two years earlier, now under siege and then stormed by their previous political allies. The result of the analysis in this chapter, however, would amplify, if not alter, that explanation.

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The dissension reviewed, above, lies not between the democrats and their communist and nationalist opponents but within the ranks of the democrats themselves. This dissension is coextensive with position-taking, and the black-and-white positions that they tend to take leave little if any room for empathetically seeing the other's point of view, let alone for reaching consensus. What is to be commemorated, a great event, a great disappointment or something even worse? This impasse results from the fact that the subjects' narratives about the revolution are framed by only two dimensions of political discourse – competence and morality – that are associated with putative *personal* qualities, themselves reflecting the *personalized* nature of political relations, use of state office and so on, as set out in the model of Civil Society *II*. In the absence of the discursive dimensions that can construct a public – community and approval – speakers are trapped in a communicative process in which each displays his/her merits and denigrates those of the other; as it were, a collective narcissism. The dialogic basis represented by the mediation of a third party, an imagined public weighing and assessing their utterances, goes missing. Thus, they are left to demonstrate their worth primarily in a negative way by assaulting the personal qualities of opponents, assaults that bring the recursive satisfaction of implicitly asserting one's own competence and morality.

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