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Politics and the Writings of Vassily Aksyonov

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**POLITICS AND THE WRITINGS OF
VASSILY AKSYONOV**

A Thesis

**Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Government
The College of William and Mary**

**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

**by
William S. Allred
1989**

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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DEDICATION

This thesis and all the work that went into it is dedicated to my parents. Finally, Mother, I have eaten the tail!

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the novels of the Soviet writer, Vassily Aksyonov. The study identifies themes and other characteristics which establish Aksyonov's works as political novels.

This study uses the definitional and analytical framework established by Irving Howe for the analysis of political novels. The study proceeds to examine the historical and political context of Aksyonov's formative and productive years as a writer but focuses especially on post-revolutionary Soviet Russia during the period following Stalin's death known commonly as the "Thaw".

The discussion begins by reaffirming the characterization of Aksyonov by other commentators as a "Thaw" generation writer. A number of recurrent themes, values and literary devices, such as satire, symbolism, and diction are analyzed for the purpose of determining whether Aksyonov's works can be identified as political novels in accordance with Howe's criteria. Consideration is also given to the statements of Aksyonov's critics.

Contrary to contemporary criticism, the study concludes that Aksyonov's works, especially his works since the late 1960s, are indeed political novels within Howe's framework.

**POLITICS AND THE WRITINGS OF
VASSILY AKSYONOV**

INTRODUCTION

Per Dalgard, a noted specialist in Russian literature and a widely published critic of Vassily Aksyonov, has stated that Aksyonov's novels and other works are not political.¹ The thesis which follows analyzes the literary works of Vassily Aksyonov. Specifically, I analyze the themes, symbolism and style of Aksyonov's novels from a political perspective. The analysis establishes that the novels of Aksyonov are indeed political novels.

The following analysis, however, is not conducted in a vacuum. I place Aksyonov's novels in their historical context, and I accept the consensus of the critics and commentators which identifies his works with a particular literary genre that flourished in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s, a genre which literary critics have called "thaw generation" works. The genre's identifying characteristics have not so much to do with literary form (i.e., novel, poetry, short story, plays, etc.) as they do

¹Per Dalgard, The Function of the Grotesque in Vasiliij Aksenov, trans. by R. Porter (Gylling, Denmark: Aarhus, 1982), pp. 114-115.

with style and theme. This analysis focuses on Aksyonov's novels and novellas.²

A. Vassily Aksyonov: A Biography

Aksyonov was born in 1932. His father was a Communist Party official, and his mother was a published historian of international fame who had been exiled to a prison camp in Siberia. Aksyonov grew up with his mother in the prison camp. He nonetheless received a professional education and graduated from medical school in 1956.³ Aksyonov published his first novel, The Colleagues, in 1960 when he was twenty-eight years old. His novella, Half-way to the Moon, was published a year later and served to establish his prominence as a thaw generation writer.

He published several plays, short stories and novellas throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including Surplus Barrelware, and the novel, Our Golden Ironburg, both of which are thematic predecessors of The Burn, his best known and most fervent

²The novella is a short prose tale of the type developed by Boccaccio, characterized by epigrammatic terseness and point. It is a "short" novel. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, ed. by William Morris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 898.

³Publisher's notes, "About the Author," in Vassily Aksyonov, The Burn, trans. by M. Glenny (New York: Ardis, 1985), p. 529. Also, John J. Johnson, "Introduction: The Life and Works of Aksenov," in Aksenov, The Steel Bird and Other Stories, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), pp. ix-xxvii.

attack on Soviet ideology.⁴ A collection of his short stories has been translated into English and published as The Steel Bird and Other Stories. His political satire, The Island of Crimea, was published in English in 1983, and The Burn, although written much earlier, was published in English the following year.

Aksyonov was a particularly vocal and active artist and, in 1979, attempted to organize and create a literary anthology free from Party censorship. The Party's central committee apparatus in charge of oversight and censorship was greatly annoyed by Aksyonov's efforts. Aksyonov abandoned the project once it became clear that the threat of censorship would not abate, and the work was eventually published under the auspices of the committee as Metropol.⁵

The Soviet government ordered Aksyonov's exile upon the 1980 publication in Italy of The Burn, a harshly critical and mocking account of the Moscow intelligentsia of the 1960s and its relationship with an oppressive but providing government. Aksyonov emigrated to the United States and now resides in Washington, D.C. In the last few years, Aksyonov has

⁴P. Blake and M. Hayward, eds., Half-way to the Moon (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 274.

⁵Kevin Klose, "Forward," in Metropol, ed. by Vassily Aksyonov, Viktor Yerofeyev, Fazil Iskander. Andrei Bitov, & Yevgeny Popov (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), pp. xii-xiii.

published a novella, Paperscape, a satire of the writing profession in Moscow, and a non-fictional work, In Search of Melancholy Baby, a narrative of Aksyonov's travels throughout the United States. Along with Aksyonov's provocative philosophical reflections, In Search of Melancholy Baby contains a poignant critique of Western, especially American, culture.

B. Definitional Framework

In order to examine objectively the recurring political themes of Aksyonov's works, this study has adopted the rather loose but pragmatic definition of "political novel" set forth in Irving Howe's work, Politics and the Novel.⁶ Before setting out to define terms, however, Howe warns of the academic mind's overzealous tendency to demand order and classification of all objects of study.⁷ To this demand Howe replies that not everything worthy of study can be classified so easily within rigid bounds. Nor should they be, for some topics worthy of critical examination are extremely subjective. The "political novel" is such a topic.⁸

⁶Howe, Irving, Politics and the Novel (New York: Horizon Press, 1957; New American Library, 1987).

⁷Ibid., p. 16.

⁸Ibid., pp. 16-17.

Nonetheless, to be of any value, a critical examination must establish ground rules and points of demarcation. According to Howe, then, the distinguishing element of the political novel is an author's preoccupation with the distribution of power.⁹ In Howe's own words, a political novel is "a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting."¹⁰ This determination -- that is, whether we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu -- is admittedly subjective and subject only to the qualifications that the novel actually permits such subjective assumptions "without thereby suffering any radical distortion" and that such an assumption allows for "the possibility of some analytical profit."¹¹

The political novel is the most immediate descendant of the social novel and is related more distantly to the picaresque tale. The picaresque tale emerged from the

⁹Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹Ibid.

political awakening of the bourgeoisie, what we would call the middle class.¹² In the picaresque tale, the bourgeois rogue-hero through wit and clever deeds is able to transcend class distinction and gain acceptance by the aristocracy. The tales are light and good-natured in tone and are not cast in the form of conflict or the bourgeoisie's accusation of aristocratic improprieties.¹³

The picaresque tale, in rather short order, evolved by the nineteenth century into the social novel. The social novel is more searching and turbulent than the picaresque tale. The merchant class hero undergoes a personal struggle, matching his personal values, and those of his class, with those of the aristocracy. The social novel openly challenges the values of the aristocracy while, at the same time, holding up as exemplary the work ethic and moral purity of the bourgeoisie.¹⁴

¹²Admittedly, the terms "bourgeoisie" and "aristocracy" have their contextual roots more firmly entrenched in European culture and history than American, owing mostly to a relatively short feudal history in America, and the terms as experiential concepts would tend to convey far less to the average American than to his European counterpart.

¹³Ibid., p. 18. Le Sage's Gil Blas (1715) is an often noted example.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 18-19. Dickens' Great Expectations (1861) and Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857) are examples of the social novel.

In the political novel, which evolved from the social novel, the individual hero of the picaresque tale and the social novel has been replaced by the idea. "[T]he idea of society, as distinct from the mere unquestioned workings of society, ha[d] penetrated the consciousness of the characters in all of its profoundly problematic aspects, so that there is to be observed in their behavior, and they [we]re themselves often aware of, some coherent political loyalty or ideological identification. They now [thought] in terms of supporting or opposing society as such; they rall[ied] to one or another embattled segment of society; and they [did] so in the name of, and under prompting from, an ideology."¹⁵

By the middle of the twentieth century, the contrast between early political hope and later disillusion had become the major theme of the political novel. Malraux, Silone, Solzhenitsyn and Koestler, Howe argues, "are all obsessed by the failure, or betrayal, of the revolution."¹⁶ This is true also of Aksyonov.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 19. Stendahl's The Red and the Black (1831) and Dostoevsky's The Possessed (1872) are examples noted by Howe as are Solzhenitsyn's The Cancer Ward and The First Circle.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 205, 268-270.

Critics have placed Aksyonov squarely within the ranks of thaw generation writers.¹⁷ The thaw genre is that class of writers and artists which emerged during the Soviet power struggle following Stalin's death. Individuals within the genre sought to publish or create works which openly questioned the improprieties of Stalin's regime, many of which were officially still unexplained mysteries. The writers of the thaw genre demanded the accountability of the Stalinists who remained in power after Stalin's death.¹⁸ Aksyonov's works evidence an ideology and morality generically similar to his colleagues of the thaw genre.

Some commentators would criticize the use of Aksyonov's later, more explosive and more refined works for the purpose of examining recurring themes in thaw genre writings. Such commentators would argue that The Burn and The Island of Crimea are emigre works.¹⁹ They would argue, furthermore, that repression is a fundamental ingredient of Russian literature. Without the milieu of persecution and suffering, the

¹⁷Leonid Rzhevsky, "The New Idiom," in Max Hayward and Edward Crowley, eds., Soviet Literature in the Sixties (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 77; Blake & Hayward, Half-way to the Moon, p. 9; Dalgard, The Function of the Grotesque in Vasilij Aksenov, pp. 5-7; Johnson, "Life and Works," p. viii; A. Gaev, "The Decade Since Stalin," in Hayward & Crowley, eds., Soviet Literature in the Sixties, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Gleb Struve, "Soviet Literature in Perspective," in Hayward & Crowley, eds., Soviet Literature in the Sixties, pp. 135-136.

characteristics of an emigre's work could not be likened to the native writer who still feels the sting of his shackles.²⁰ For several reasons, such criticisms are flawed and generally irrelevant for the present purpose.

First, all but one of Aksyonov's works considered in this thesis were written before his emigration to the United States. Like Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago, The Burn and The Island of Crimea were published abroad while Aksyonov still resided in the Soviet Union. They are no more emigre works than Doctor Zhivago. Second, since Aksyonov still lived in the Soviet Union when the works analyzed in this thesis were published, his work was subject to the same forces (i.e., repression, censorship, persecution, etc.) as the work of other thaw genre artists. Such criticisms are akin to saying that the thaw writers stopped writing all together following their hayday of the least amount of repression in the early 1960s which ignores the fact that they kept writing and, from time to time, kept publishing.²¹

Lastly, it seems that such criticisms raise the question of how to delineate thaw genre literature. As Howe would argue, the "genre" can be very useful in literary analysis. Genres "point to a dominant emphasis, a significant stress in

²⁰Vassily Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby (New York: PRandom House, 1985), p. 194.

²¹Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby, p. 188.

the writer's subject or in his attitude toward it. They may, that is, be convenient ways of talking about certain rather small groups of novels."²² No two individuals write exactly alike, and surely while there may be differences in the writings among those identified as thaw genre writers, the common characteristics are far more significant for purposes of analysis. The writers were raised in the same repressive system at roughly the same period of time (genres are ordinarily a function of eras as well as other factors). They were filled with the same expectations for greater expressive freedom, and they all "had the rug snatched out from under them" at roughly the same time.

C. Structural Framework

This thesis first examines the cohesive elements that bonded together the thaw generation writers. The analysis does not seek to question why literary critics have identified Aksyonov as a writer of the thaw generation. Rather, the analysis focuses on the themes, symbolism and style of Aksyonov's novels in order to establish that his novels are political novels.

Chapter 1 provides a brief historical account of the times of the thaw generation, the milieu in which Aksyonov developed as a developing as a young artist. Since the

²²Howe, Politics and the Novel, p. 16.

perspective of this work is political rather than historical, I am not concerned with providing the definitive history of the Soviet Union. The subject of this thesis, however, a human being and his literary works, must be analyzed within the context of his time.

Chapter 2 identifies and examines the recurring political themes of Aksyonov's novels and novellas and the particular qualities which allow us to refer to them as "political novels". Chapter 3 explores the symbolism and peculiar style Aksyonov uses to communicate and embellish the plight of the individual, such as escapism through decadence and debauchery, the use of woman as a symbol of the apolitical and nurturing motherland (the "Rodina"), and the transcendentalism of jazz.

Chapter 4 concludes this thesis with some remarks about Aksyonov's contribution to the community of political writers and the body of literary art we call the political novel.

CHAPTER 1

THE EMERGENCE OF THE THAW GENERATION: THE MILIEU OF VASSILY AKSYONOV

A. The Soviet Experience and Literature

Given the prominence of ideology in the political novel, commentators since Irving Howe have come to identify pre-conditions of the political novel.¹ These include "the artists' right to explore experience, to organize their findings in literary forms and to gain access to the public -- all reasonably free of dictation or persecution."² Howe states that the essence of the political novel is the juxtaposition of competing ideas or ideologies passionately rendered through the intense interaction of the characters.³ The political novel is often, then, a vehicle of political opposition.

Totalitarian states, however, are intolerant of opposition, and since the Bolshevik Revolution and the instal

¹Rufus Mathewson, "The Novel in Russia and the West," in Hayward & Crowley, eds., Soviet Literature in the Sixties, p. 3.

²Ibid.

³Howe, Politics and the Novel, pp. 21-24.

lation of the Soviet regime, a totalitarian political order has actively suppressed the preconditions of the political novel in the Soviet Union. Important works such as Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago and Solzhenitsyn's Cancer Ward and The First Circle represent not only breaches in the Soviet regime's attempts to suppress opposition but also hope that "the totalitarian states have [not] succeeded in transforming not only public speech but also private minds."⁴

The political climate imposed by Stalin was stifling to the individualistic literary style of pre-Revolutionary Russian writers.⁵ The victory of the Bolsheviks and Marxists in 1917, moreover, spelled doom for organized religion within Soviet Russia. The erection of a flawless model of the supreme communist state, for all of mankind to see, could not be built by workers who were intoxicated by the opiate of religion. The entrenchment of the Soviet form of government in Russia represents the story of Soviet leadership's persistent attempts to substitute nationalism for religion and human efficiency for human identity.

As a writer from the thaw generation has stated, "'the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development' -- is founded on the concept

⁴Ibid., p. 270.

⁵Mathewson, "The Novel in Russia," pp. 1-3.

of Purpose with a Capital 'P'. The Purpose is an all embracing idea, toward which truthfully representative reality ascends in an undeviating revolutionary movement The Purpose is Communism."⁶ The Purpose in Soviet history becomes suffused with religiosity. "The official goal of Soviet society," in Aksyonov's words, "is to reach the stage of historical development known as Communism. For want of religious underpinning, the goal has taken on a purely pragmatic and rather feeble-minded 'self-help' kind of image; it is now a means of 'satisfying the evergrowing demands of the working people'."⁷ Thus, Soviet leadership's hope was that every Soviet citizen would work toward the Purpose with religious, almost fanatical, zeal.

True faith and tolerance, however, are incompatible, and the Soviet ruling committees could not tolerate any expressive form, literary or otherwise, that mocked, criticized, or called into question the Soviet state's legitimacy or its quest for Communism. Siniavskii argues that "the specific teleology of Marxist thought consists in leading all concepts and objects to the Purpose, referring them all to the Purpose, and defining them all through the Purpose . . . thousands of

⁶Siniavskii, A. [Abram Tertz], On Socialist Realism, trans. by George Dennis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 26.

⁷Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby, p. 16.

martyrs of the revolution gave up their lives for the new religion and surpassed the first Christians in their sufferings, their steadfastness, and their holiness."⁸

B. Socialist Realism

In such a milieu, the State created a new literary form known as Socialist Realism. The purpose of Socialist Realism is "to direct the revolutionary movement toward its end and to help the reader approach it more closely by transforming his consciousness."⁹ Socialist Realism came to supplant the unacceptably individualistic political novel as an "approved" literary form. Khrushchev believed that "the highest social destiny of art and literature is to mobilize the people to the struggle for new advances in the building of Communism."¹⁰ Socialist Realism, then, was the use of art as political propaganda.

⁸Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, pp. 35-36.

⁹Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰"For A Close Link Between Literature And Art in the Life of the People," a speech by Nikita Khrushchev before the Central Committee Presidium in May, 1957, quoted in Gaev, "The Decade Since Stalin," p. 25 & n.10.

Socialist Realism produced a new and predictable kind of hero, the "positive hero."¹¹ The positive hero exemplified the most virtuous characteristics of Soviet citizenry. He was depicted as one who gave up personal desires of material gain and sexual fulfillment in order to contribute to the state's attainment of the Purpose. He had no inner doubts or hesitations, no unanswerable questions or impenetrable secrets.¹² He invariably marched forward despite the artful intrigue of evil capitalists and nonbelievers. He was cast as an assembly line worker at a rivet factory, a collective farm worker, a coal miner, a soldier, or a child Komsomol member placed by fate amidst vain and individualistic peers who sought only self-glorification. Despite his unwholesome environment among the unfaithful, the positive hero nonetheless emerged as a purist, a teacher, and one who led his misguided peers back to the Purpose.¹³

¹¹Siniavkii, On Socialist Realism, p. 48; McLean and W. Vickery, transl. & eds., The Year of Protest, 1956: An Anthology of Soviet Literary Materials (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. 13-14; see generally Rufus Mathewson, The Positive Hero in Russian Literature (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975).

¹²Ibid., pp. 48-49.

¹³Ibid., pp. 53-57; McLean, Protest, 1956, p. 16.

Writers of Socialist Realism, such as Leonov, Mayakovski, Il'enkov, Isakovski, and Bagritski, portrayed an affected "realism" in their works that was pre-scripted by the Party. That is, the day to day exploits of the positive hero were portrayed as those experienced daily by all Soviet citizens.¹⁴ Yet, it was plain to most Soviet citizens that there was great divergence between the Socialist Realism found in contemporary writings and the realism they lived everyday.

"We set about to correct the universe according to the best of methods, the shining model of the Purpose which we approached ever more closely. So that prisons should vanish forever, we built new prisons. So that all frontiers should fall, we surrounded ourselves with a Chinese wall. So that work should become a rest and a pleasure, we introduced forced labor. So that not one drop of blood be shed any more, we killed and killed and killed. In the name of the Purpose we turned to the means that our enemies used: We glorified imperial Russia, we wrote lies in Pravda [Truth], we set a new Czar on the now empty throne, we introduced officers epaulettes and tortures. . . ."¹⁵

The central dispute raised by the thaw generation writers was that after Stalin's death, after the barbarity and excess of his regime's failures and crimes were publicized, the succeeding Soviet leadership remarkably maintained its rigidity and continued to laud both the greatness of Communism and the works of Socialist Realist writers.

¹⁴V. Il'enkov's The Great Highway is an example. See generally McLean, Protest, 1956, pp. 13-14.

¹⁵Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 38.

C. Stalin's Death: A Glimmer of Political Hope

A great power struggle ensued after Stalin's death.¹⁶ All participants acted guardedly within the first couple of years after Stalin's death before any one leader became prominent. By the end of 1954, Khrushchev emerged as a contender for party secretary. At the same time, boldly new and expressive works came to light,¹⁷ most notably Ehrenburg's novel, The Thaw.¹⁸ Khrushchev was well aware of the popular dissatisfaction with and loss of faith in the Purpose as singularly defined by Stalin, and it is hardly coincidental that individually expressive works were published during this time when Khrushchev was emerging as the probable victor in the power struggle among Malenkov, Molotov, Bulganin, and Khrushchev.¹⁹

¹⁶Gaev, "The Decade," pp. 21-22.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁸McLean, Protest, 1956, p. 4.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 16-20.

The "thaw"²⁰ that began in 1954 was the product of the unresolved power struggle among Soviet leaders. Party control over the Writer's Union was undirected.²¹ Numerous works reflective of pent up frustrations on the part of writers, were published one by one, each as a trial balloon for the next.²² Writers began making individual pleas to be permitted to write of individualism, love and sorrow;²³ they began protesting against party censorship of literature.²⁴ Ehrenburg denounced the Party's use of writers as propaganda hacks.²⁵

In February, 1956, Khrushchev delivered his famous "secret speech" to the Writer's Union during the convening of the Twentieth Party Congress in which he officially initiated

²⁰The "thaw", an era which derived its name from Ehrenburg's novel, loosely defined, was the roughly decade-long period following Stalin's death when, for a number of reasons, literature produced by the young, liberal intelligentsia and violative of Socialist Realist parameters were published.

²¹Gaev, "The Decade," pp. 21-22.

²²McLean, Protest, 1956, p. 17.

²³The poet Olga Berggolts made this plea on behalf of all lyric poets. Ibid., p. 17.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.; Gaev, "The Decade," pp. 20-21.

his de-Stalinization campaign.²⁶ While many thought the Writer's Union's housecleaning spelled the end of the thaw, Khrushchev's secret speech, which was quickly leaked throughout the Soviet Union and the world, gave the movement new life. The new literature, it seemed, comported well with Khrushchev's political, economic and ideological program of de-Stalinization,²⁷ and there was a great proliferation of "protest" writings throughout 1956.²⁸

Khrushchev's secret speech and subsequent public denunciations of Stalin's crimes and excesses exemplified his political maneuvers to disassociate himself from Stalin's inner circle.²⁹ Scores of works which protested Stalin's acts and the conduct of his old guard were being published in the Soviet magazines Novy Mir (New World) and Literaturnaya Moskva (Literary Moscow). While Doctor Zhivago had been clandestinely passed through the iron curtain for publication in the West, Dudinstev's Not By Bread Alone and Ehrenburg's The Thaw were among the first to be published in what seemed to be a new and more permissive literary climate.

²⁶McLean, Protest, 1956, p. 20.

²⁷Blake & Hayward, Half-way to the Moon, p. 17.

²⁸Gaev, "The Decade," p. 22.

²⁹McLean, Protest, 1956, p. 20.

"The new literature of this period was essentially a literature of protest -- of moral protest -- especially against hypocrisy and falsehood."³⁰ It was a body of literature demanding the government's accountability to the people. Such daring publications did not go unnoticed. The Secretary of the Writer's Union and other leaders of the Union of Soviet Writers published personal attacks in Pravda on what they deemed an alarming trend toward subversive works.³¹ The Writer's Union, largely led by Stalinist party stalwarts, initially acted hesitantly and inconsistently given Khrushchev's earlier remarks. The Union, however, did fire a number of the "dissident" writers from the staffs of various magazines. All of this action took place in 1956 without official party intervention.³²

Interestingly, one can readily identify common features in the thaw writers' works, such as the loud protestation of the crying injustice which prevailed in the country, the assertion that an immense rift had developed between the people and the political leaders, and the vituperative

³⁰Ibid., p. 21.

³¹Ibid., pp. 18-19; Gaev, "The Decade," pp. 24-25.

³²McLean, Protest, 1956, pp. 17-19.

criticisms of Socialist Realism and government censorship of art and literature.³³ The thaw writers' conduct was clearly in opposition to the Party line and the Charter of the Union of Soviet Writers.³⁴ Attacks on Socialist Realism were acts of mutiny, manifestations of free thought entirely contrary to the official position of the Party.³⁵

It would be erroneous to say, however, that the thaw writers proceeded with the support of the Party. Khrushchev's secret speech to the Writer's Union was not meant to be an official articulation of Party policy. Rather, the writers were sworn to follow the official guidelines adopted in the Charter of the Union of Soviet Writers which had been drafted during Stalin's regime. Any support the thaw writers gleaned from Khrushchev's words and deeds was inferential. Nothing in the official Party record confirmed that support.

The spring and summer of 1957 were critical times for Khrushchev and his coalition.³⁶ In 1956, the Poles and the Hungarians revolted. Soviet political leadership and the military acted swiftly to contain the revolts and to eliminate

³³Gaev, "The Decade," pp. 24-25.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 24-25.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

the political opposition in those countries by 1957. Khrushchev was suspicious of the antagonistic role that the literary elite, or the Petofei Circle, had played in the Hungarian revolt. It was not surprising, therefore, when in May, 1957, Khrushchev and the Central Committee condemned the works of many of the younger more radical writers within the Soviet Union.³⁷ Khrushchev met with groups of writers and warned them of their errant behavior.³⁸

Within months after the Soviet gutting of the Hungarian revolt, Khrushchev had solidified his power, a point in time marked by the Central Committee Presidium's expulsion of Malankov, Molotov, Bulganin, and Voroshlov.³⁹ Party and Writer's Union leaders of the old guard were emboldened, and they stepped up their denunciations of the seditious, "free thinking" writers.⁴⁰ With Khrushchev's official support, the leaders of the Writer's Union publicly censured many of the younger writers, and the Union leadership consolidated its own power by removing radical writers from editorial positions and replacing them with old guard Socialist Realist purists. The

³⁷Ibid., pp. 25-26; Peter Benno, "The Political Aspect," in Hayward & Crowley, Soviet Literature in the Sixties, p. 190.

³⁸McLean, Protest, 1956, p. 25.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 25-26; Gaev, "The Decade," p. 25.

⁴⁰Gaev, "The Decade," p. 25.

Union demanded apologies and recantations of subversive themes of many of the younger authors, including Aksyonov.⁴¹

Seemingly reversing himself in the eyes of the thaw writers, Khrushchev spoke publicly in August, 1957, in support of the subordination of literature and other forms of art to the requirements of the Party.⁴²

Despite the Writer's Union's censures and the personal attacks in the form of letters to the editors of literary magazines by old guard Union leaders, the Union failed to suppress entirely the writings of the younger "thaw" generation, or the "Poputchiki" as they came to be called.⁴³ Between 1957 and 1961, an occasional dissident work would pass through the chinks of the Union's censorship committee. Despite the Party's crackdown and more rigid enforcement of

⁴¹Johnson, "Life and Works," p. xv; John J. Johnson, Jr., "V.P. Aksenov: A Literary Biography," in Vasiliy Pavlovich Aksenov: A Writer in Quest of Himself, ed. by Edward Mozejko (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1986), pp. 36-37.

⁴²Gaev, "The Decade," p. 25.

⁴³The Russian slang word "poputchiki" is the bastardized, plural, objective derivative of the word "poputnichestvo", a derogatory term coined by Trotsky. The "poputnichestvo" in Trotsky's time was the writer who rejected Communist ideology and Socialist Realism and, instead, interpreted the meaning of the Soviet Revolution in his own way. The Poputchiki are individualistic thinkers and writers. Ibid., p. 41.

Socialist Realism guidelines, the thaw writers continued to criticize the Stalinists and Socialist Realism.⁴⁴

Given the Soviet Union's commanding position in the Soviet -American space race and its concomitant technological implications, Khrushchev was ebulliently confident, and in 1960 he announced the implementation of the Soviet Union's new foreign and cultural policy of "Peaceful Coexistence." He publicly set out to overtake America and to build a prosperous society by the year 1980.⁴⁵ At the Twenty-Second Party Congress, Khrushchev once again reversed his policies toward the arts and initiated a second period of de-Stalinization and relative artistic freedom.⁴⁶ Literary topics that had been condemned and avoided by the Writer's Union during the tense months of 1957 gradually became current again by 1961.⁴⁷ A thunderous backlash from the old guard Stalinists was met by Khrushchev's rapacious denunciation of Stalin and, by association, his very opponents. It was at this moment that Khrushchev impetuously ordered the removal of Stalin's body from the Red Square Mausoleum.⁴⁸ Khrushchev also approved and

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby, p. 16.

⁴⁶Benno, "Political Aspect," p. 190.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 190.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 190.

ordered the publication of Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich and Yevtushenko's "Heirs of Stalin" in the Soviet literary magazine, Novy Mir (New World).⁴⁹

Khrushchev had two objectives. First, he had a very sincere goal of creating a new Soviet economy that would outshine economic production in the United States.⁵⁰

Khrushchev blamed the Soviet Union's economic stagnation on the inefficient Stalinist bureaucrats and managers still in power. Khrushchev determined that by allowing the publication of sensational and emotionally pitched anti-Stalin literature, he would afford himself considerable leverage in making what would become very popular decisions to oust these individuals from power. Second, and of lesser importance, Khrushchev was now on record before the whole world that the Soviet system was better than America's, better than the West's. Under Khrushchev's leadership, the Soviet Union would become the economic leader of the world. He realized all too well the significant window dressing effects of permitting and sponsoring a bit of literary Glasnost.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 190-191. Although Khrushchev ordered the publication of Solzhenitsyn's One Day in June, 1962, it was not actually published until November, 1962.; Johnson, Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 4-5.

⁵⁰Johnson, Khrushchev and the Arts, p. 5.

The period between 1962 and Khrushchev's removal from the Presidium in 1964 saw the most fervent period of anti-Stalinist writings of the thaw writers of the entire decade long thaw. With the failure of Khrushchev's economic policies and the American surge in the space and technology races, Khrushchev's coalition crumbled. The reinstitutionalization of the more conservative old guard followed Khrushchev's fall, and the period known as the thaw came to an end. "By destroying the legend of Stalin the Party [under Khrushchev] had, in fact, destroyed the myth of its own infallibility. It had disillusioned thousands of Russians, above all young Russians, who had not lost the capacity to ask questions."⁵¹

The younger writers continued to work for nonconformist literary expression, but each success, the founding of the literary journal "Yunost" ("Youth"), the non-conformist writer's revolt against the rigid, doctrinaire Socialist Realism, was met with a devastating set back, such as the expulsion of a number of dissident writers, including Solzhenitsyn and Aksyonov.⁵² Staggering along the brink of financial collapse and facing new tensions with the Chinese, the new conservative ruling coalition under Brezhnev succeeded

⁵¹Ibid., p. 1.

⁵²Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby, p. 188.

with few exceptions in reinstitutionalizing Socialist Realism as the only acceptable form of Soviet literature.

D. Identifying Characteristics of "Thaw" Genre Writings

Clearly, a readily identifiable genre of literature and writers developed during the thaw decade between 1954 and 1964. Distinctive features of this genre are numerous. Unique themes and literary devices distinguish the thaw generation writers⁵³ from others.

One of the more prominent features found in thaw writings is the reemergence of the Poputchiki.⁵⁴ Leon Trotsky coined the term as a derogatory word, referring to the writer who rejected Communism and wrote in accordance with his own views regarding the Great Russian Revolution and social problems. When the Party institutionalized Socialist Realism, many of the Poputchiki were "liquidated." Others were simply denied the right to publish. The Poputchiki are the opposition writers, nonconformists who criticize Communism, Socialist Realism, and the accountability of the Soviet government to the people.

⁵³Thaw writers include Voznesensky, Vinokurov, Akhmadulina, Solzhenitsyn, Kazakov, Sosnora, Slutsky, Evtushenko, Okudzhava (musician and lyricist), Nekrasov, Yashin, Zhdanov, Nagibin, Rozhdestvensky, Trifonov, Bitov, Gladilin and, of course, Aksyonov.

⁵⁴Gaev, "The Decade," pp. 41-47.

Consider, for example, the autobiographical epic People, Years, Life, by Ehrenburg who discusses his views on art, political developments and the West. In the work, Ehrenburg takes positions directly opposed to the tenets of Communism and Socialist Realism. He lauds an acquaintance who describes his exploits during war without ascribing to himself any of the positive hero's self-embellishment so common in Socialist Realist works. He describes himself as a survivor rather than a hero.⁵⁵ In the same work, Ehrenburg openly avows his love and respect for Boris Pasternak at a time when Pasternak was openly labelled by the highest Soviet authorities as a traitor and an enemy of the State.⁵⁶ Ehrenburg also criticizes the dysfunctionality of Socialist Realism as well as the Party's position that literature is a propaganda function of the State.

The traditions of the Poputchiki are found also in the works of Nekrasov, Tendryakov, Zhdanov and Nagibin. In Both Sides of the Ocean, Nekrasov brazenly praised contemporary American art, an art form harshly criticized by the Party as bourgeois.⁵⁷ In A Trip Back Home, a short story by Zhdanov, a high party official is called back to his remote provincial

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 47-49.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 22-23.

home for his mother's funeral. Much of the story centers on the official's thoughts following the funeral as he waits in his mother's deteriorating cottage for his train back to Moscow. He gazes out the window at the appalling poverty and the squalid standard of life on the collective farm. In conversations with neighbors it dawns on him that the peasants have no hope of a better life. An old friend of his mother's asks him whether the State "has done right to us," and the story closes with the question unanswered.⁵⁸

In The Trial, Tendryakov disassociates truth and moral conviction from the Purpose. A Party official, a provincial medical officer, and their guide, an old but experienced hunter, have gone bear hunting together. During their trip, a man who was wandering through the forest is accidentally shot. After extracting the bullet, the old guide learns that it was the Party official who shot the man. The official melts down the bullet, and at trial, pressures the old guide to lie for him. The story focuses on the old man's moral dilemma. In the end, the old man chooses to lie in order to avoid being charged with perjury by the judge.⁵⁹ Thaw writers in such works as The Trial and A Trip Back Home focus on the corruption and moral impoverishment of both the Party and

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 43.

Communism as it exists in the Soviet Union. The thaw writers also consistently criticized the State's lethargic responses to various social problems.

The works of the thaw generation are also rich in the symbolism of de-Stalinization. De-Stalinization is expressed in a number of ways, including betrayal and rape. Stalin and Soviet citizens who worked willfully to further his policies and purges are treated with scorn and immense hatred. However, since the relative openness which permitted the thaw genre's works came only after Stalin's death, an entire generation had emerged between that time and the height of Stalin's barbarity. The older generation, which exemplified the Stalinist functionaries, was the object of the younger generation's scorn, and, in many works of the thaw genre, generation is pitted against generation, the young holding the old responsible and asking how the latter could stand by and let Stalin get away with his crimes.

The theme of de-Stalinization is most frequently characterized by the thaw writer's demand for the old guard's accountability. In Alyoshin's play, "The Ward," for example, an argument takes place between two hospital patients, a Party official and a writer, two who ordinarily would have nothing to do with each other. In the Ward, the two are forced to

interact. They converse and learn of each other's past. The hatred between them colors most of the work's passages. The party official tells the writer that had the writer been around before 1953, surely he would have been liquidated. The writer is aghast that the official can shrug off his crimes with a "just following orders" rationalization. The work disparages the Party since the reader is left with the question whether one man alone could commit so much evil without the complicity of the Party.⁶⁰

The theme of anti-semitism is also unique to thaw writings. It is often interwoven with the theme of adversarial generations. Stalin and the Party had officially supported policies of anti-semitism.⁶¹ The questioning younger generation speaks embarrassingly of the rampant anti-semitism uniformly sanctioned by official conduct. In Evtushenko's poem, "Babi Yar," for instance, the poet tells the true story of the Nazi massacre of hundreds of Soviet citizens, the vast majority of whom were Jews. Many historians now question whether Stalin played the role of a silent, inactive co-conspirator in the role. Following the war, the State built a monument in memory of the victims of

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 47.

⁶¹Benno, "Political Aspect," p. 197.

Babi Yar. While the monument recognized the loss of Russians, Ukranians, Latvians, Estonians and people of other "Soviet" nationalities, it never recognized the loss of the Jews.⁶²

Many of the short stories, novellas and novels of the thaw genre depict events which occurred in the last years of Stalin's reign during his purges of liberal, white collar intellectuals.⁶³ Stalin used anti-semitism to stir up support for his anti-cosmopolitan crusade against the liberal intelligentsia. The old and vocal novelist, Paustovsky, who miraculously survived Stalin's purges, frequently accused the apparatchiki⁶⁴ of anti-semitism.⁶⁵ In Not By Bread Alone, Dudinstev portrays the Stalinist bureaucrats, or apparatchiki, as unlikeable and despicably anti-semitic.

In thaw genre writings, it is evident that the young writers are also in search of purity of form. Before the Bolshevik Revolution and throughout the nineteenth century, many Russian classics fell within the genre of romanticism.

⁶²Blake & Edwards, Half-way to the Moon, pp. 7-21.

⁶³McLean, Protest, 1956, pp. 14-15; Benno, "Political Aspect," p. 189.

⁶⁴"Apparatchiki are government bureaucrats that have a reputation similar to that of IRS workers in this country.

⁶⁵Blake & Hayward, Half-way to the Moon, p. 30; Johnson, Khrushchev and the Arts, pp. ix-x.

Gorky is often cited as a primary example of romantic writers of the pre-revolutionary period.⁶⁶ Romanticism is representative of human wishes, dreams, and the search for perfection. Russian romanticism, such as the writings of Dostoevsky, is in part the quest for ideology -- a belief in God, a belief in nothing, or simply measuring socialism, democracy and capitalism against one another. More importantly, the purpose of the quest is inner fulfillment and the satisfaction of the individual's sensual desires. But romanticism is the stuff of pretty little lies and invariably produces unrealistic plots and relationships in order to perpetuate idealism.⁶⁷

According to at least one critic, Socialist Realism represents the other end of the literary continuum of "unrealism." Socialist Realism, said Siniavskii, was merely a form of classicism as characterized by its passion for solemnity and simplistic style.⁶⁸ Unlike romanticism, Socialist Realism did not involve pretty little lies, but was based on the One

⁶⁶Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 77; Per Dalgard, "Some Literary Roots of Aksenov's Writings: Affinities and Parallels," in In Quest of Himself, pp. 68-69.

⁶⁷Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 77.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 83-84.

Big Lie.⁶⁹ The struggle of Socialist Realism is not the inner quest of the author for ideology or meaning of life from the perspective of the individual. Rather it is a script for the masses, an exhortation to put the evolutionarily antiquated notion of individualism behind and to contribute to the whole, to the Purpose.

Unlike the characters in romantic works, the positive heroes of Socialist Realist works no longer curse, fight, or drink themselves senseless the way the Russian people "used to." Characters of Socialist Realism are good, virtuous and flawless people who do everything for the State and the Purpose.⁷⁰ Human emotion and individual desire are irrelevant.

The writers of the thaw genre overreacted to the utter lack of realism in Socialist Realism and rejected the rosy-eyed unrealism of Romanticism. Instead, they produced works "on the other side" of realism. Surrealism and the grotesque eventually became hallmarks of thaw genre writings.

Initial works were purely realistic as the younger writers attempted to move away from the unrealism and tenets of Socialist Realism and to initiate a catharsis or cleansing

⁶⁹Vassily Aksyonov, The Island of Crimea, trans. by Michael H. Heim (New York: Aventura, 1984), p. 242.

⁷⁰Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 85.

of the Russian soul. Initially, while the thaw writers set out to depict realistic characters and situations, they retained many stylistic features of Socialist Realism. Aksyonov's The Colleagues is a good example of this early developmental form.

Thaw writers gradually moved away from the stylistic attributes of Socialist Realism. Writers jettisoned the mundane chronological narrative style. Aksyonov, for example, came close to overusing time and place in The Burn, as the narration and dialogue bounce wildly back and forth between various decades, personalities, and settings. Thaw writers eventually moved away from pure realism as well.

As Siniavskii envisioned in his work, On Socialist Realism, thaw genre writers began to explore the phantasmagoric and the use of the grotesque.⁷¹ Aksyonov, who employs the grotesque a great deal in his works, says that "the dislocation into grotesquerie and unreality in my fiction leads to greater depths."⁷² Thus, the grotesque is used to reinforce the message expressed in some of the works of the thaw genre. "The overriding principle of the grotesque is 'making it strange.' Grotesque, 'making strange', does not need to reflect man's alienation, it does not need to be a

⁷¹Ibid., p. 94.

⁷²Aksyonov, as quoted in Dalgard, The Grotesque, p. 5.

satire or an attempt to defeat demonic forces in the world, but the very principal of 'making strange' is essential to the grotesque. Its most important function is to make the spectator see the world and things in a new light, from another viewpoint."⁷³

The thaw writers also evidence an unequivocal rejection of Standard Russian. To punctuate their rejection of Socialist Realism and its old style as well as to articulate the more liberal beliefs of their own genre, thaw writers wrote in colloquial form. While writings from the Socialist Realist period are marked with stilted, though grammatically correct, usage of language, writings of the thaw genre have eschewed formalistic rules of grammar and rely, instead, on slang terms and words of Western languages which convey untraditional values, such as "cool" and "ciao".⁷⁴ This tool also demonstrates the younger generation's disaffection with the older generation -- another manifestation of the generational divisiveness. Where peasants enter as characters in thaw writings, they speak peasant colloquial or regional dialects instead of Standard Russian. This tool also serves

⁷³Dalgard, The Grotesque, p. 24.

⁷⁴Rzhevsky, "The New Idiom," pp. 58, 69.

to lend greater realism to such works.⁷⁵ Aksyonov, in particular, makes wide use of slang terms and Americanisms.⁷⁶

The thaw genre writers also use mockingly the language of officialdom, Party propaganda, and bureaucratic jargon. The context and written inflection in conversations where such jargon is used clearly denotes scorn and the younger generation's hatred of the old guard Stalinists' apparatchiki.⁷⁷ In their quest for greater freedom of expression the younger Soviet writers of the thaw period reached far in their rejection of Socialist Realism to create a wholly new, fresh, and distinguishable style of writing.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 56.

⁷⁶Johnson, Khrushchev and the Arts, p. viii.

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 65-66, 77; Laszlo Tikos, Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies, University of Massachusetts, interview held in Amherst, Massachusetts, January, 1988.

CHAPTER 2

POLITICAL THEMES OF AKSYONOV'S WRITINGS: EXTERMINATING THE LEGACY OF STALIN AND THE SEARCH FOR PERSONAL IDENTITY

A. Introduction: Themes of Aksyonov's Times

Aksyonov's writings contain a number of recurrent political themes. I have chosen to analyze only four: Betrayal and the intelligentsia's demands for accountability; the intelligentsia's quest for identity; the ultimate lethargy and powerlessness of the intelligentsia, and insatiable materialism and the search for spiritual fulfillment. These themes are common to thaw writers as a whole and are attributable to the generation's milieu.

During Stalin's reign, the quest for the perfect Communist state attained a spiritual fervor, with all life regarded as "a march toward Communism."¹ One commentator compares the development of Communism with the development of Christianity. He analogizes between the corruption and degradation of Christianity, as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition, the sale of indulgences, witch hunts, the massacre of St. Bartholomew, and the crusades, on the one hand, with the evisceration of Communism by Stalin and his

¹Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 32.

functionaries on the other hand.² Both are the remnants, in the commentator's view, of corrupted revolutions.

The corruption of the Boshevik Revolution, and resulting betrayal, was far-reaching in that millions of lives were lost, the Church victimized, and art and literature relegated to propaganda functions of the state -- all in the name of Communism. For example, the following passage is found within Khrushchev's speech regarding Socialist Realism:³

"Literature and art are part of the whole people's struggle for Communism. . . . The highest social destiny of art and literature is to mobilize the people to the struggle for new advances in the building of Communism."

²Ibid., p. 39.

³"For A Close Link Between Literature And Art in the Life of the People," a speech by Nikita Khrushchev before the Central Committee Presidium in May, 1957, quoted in Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 40. In the 1934 Charter of the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Socialist Realism is defined as follows:

Socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism."

Charter, p. 716 (quoted in Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, p. 24).

Any art or literary forms evocative of individuality are not supportive of Communism and are, therefore, seditious by definition.

Consequently, there is no official concern for free expression in the Soviet Union because it is neither central nor remotely important to the erection of Communism. Individual needs, especially satisfaction of the ego, are subordinated to the needs of the state. A Soviet citizen's life is dedicated to the task of leaving this world having brought it closer through his labors to a perfect Communist state than it was at his birth. For years, under the Soviet system, Socialist Realist writers were to Communism what Horatio Algers was to the American Dream and Capitalism.

Stalin's corruption of the revolution and Communism were not entirely hidden from the Soviet people, however, especially from the intelligentsia. The increasing affluence and privileges of Party officials, ranking bureaucrats, and military officers defied the philosophical bedrock of egalitarianism articulated in State schools. The masses often went for long periods without staples and household necessities because those items were not available at local commissaries. Yet the higher echelon never seemed to suffer from such shortages or other economic vagaries. The symptoms of corruption were ubiquitous.

Following Stalin's death and during the ensuing power struggle among Soviet leaders, a number of formerly dissident writers as well as younger unpublished writers began to criticize Stalin's regime. Stories of his barbarous excesses came to light. Writers publicly denounced state-sponsored censorship. In accord with the history related earlier, much of this activity flourished very briefly from 1954 through 1956. Aksyonov was 21 and beginning medical school when Stalin died. Following Khrushchev's consolidation of power and the Hungarian and Polish revolts, the government publicly censured writers who strayed from the tenets of Socialist Realism. Khrushchev's crackdown did not last long. In 1960, the government was once again ignoring the publication of thaw genre writings and even lauded some particularly anti-Stalinist works. Aksyonov published his first work during this second period of thaw genre activity and government sponsored de-Stalinization when he was 28 years old, and he was but 32 when he watched much of the initiative of the thaw genre crumble when the conservatives/Stalinists returned to power in 1964. Such was the milieu of thaw generation writers; such was Aksyonov's milieu.

A number of theorists have concluded that one's ideas and one's knowledge are, in part, products of his cultural milieu. Karl Marx wrote that ideas are a reflection of the

material conditions which determine production, not vice versa.⁴ Hans Speier argued further that social ideas differ according to "the contingencies of time and space," or across historical and cultural boundaries. That is, ideas will vary given different contexts of interaction.⁵ Other theorists have added that cohort membership, or one's collective existence within a subculture, is also crucial to the emergence and perpetuation of ideas and knowledge.⁶ This theory or science of knowledge was offered by a school of 20th century German philosophers in order to counter prevailing 19th century Hegelian theory that ideas and knowledge exist independently of human existence.

Surprisingly, Dalgard, the Danish critic of Russian literature, analyzes Aksyonov only in the historical context of Russian literature and ignores the state of cultural, political and economic affairs in the Soviet Union both prior to the date of Aksyonov's first publication and thereafter. But surely Dalgard would admit that the use of themes in literature is, in itself, a form of communicating ideas.

⁴Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, The German Ideology, ed. by C. J. Arthur (New York: International Pub., 1978), p. 42.

⁵Speier, Hans, "The Social Determination of Ideas," in Social Order and Risk of War (1952), p. 105.

⁶Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, transl. by L. Wirth & E. Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1936), p. 270.

It is rather apparent, then, that an understanding of Aksyonov's cultural and historical background must precede any attempt to characterize his works as political or otherwise.

B. Betrayal and accountability

Betrayal and accountability are prevalent themes in Aksyonov's works. They represent different but related facets of the more central theme of Stalin's corruption of the Bolshevik Revolution. In the name of Communism, Stalin and his functionaries betrayed the masses and outrightly murdered millions of them. No one was held accountable for these crimes until Khrushchev initiated his first wave of de-Stalinization in the mid-1950s, and, even then, the Party exposed very little. Most importantly, Khrushchev sought to place blame primarily on Stalin, while the intelligentsia knew that many government officials still in power had to have been responsible for many of the atrocities and much of the bureaucratic corruption. Thaw writers demanded the accountability of such officials.

In the novella, Surplussed Barrelware, for example, the main characters embark on a Chauceresque "pilgrimage" to the Provincial capital, each for his or her own distinct reason. The main character, Teleskopov, is transporting a

load of barrels to the capital for redemption, much as in this country one might redeem returnable bottles. Teleskopov is willing to give the other travelers a ride in his truck, but the barrels take up so much room that each must occupy a barrel to make the ride. The story proceeds alternating between narrations of the events that befall the travelers and each's peculiar dream which, ultimately we learn, end the same way.

Each traveler becomes sentimentally attached to his own barrel by the time the travelers arrive at the capital. Their trip was arduous and long. The local authorities reject the barrels, however, and refuse to give Teleskopov any money for them. For all of their work in transporting the barrels, they reap no reward. Nonetheless, they return to the loaded truck, and the common narrative voice resumes, "we saw our misfortunate, desecrated, surplussed barrelware. Our hearts sank on account of her alluring tenderness which was dissipating itself with the sunset, at dusk. And then she saw us. She purred, poured forth some special song, pearled herself with light under the early morning stars, and proffered little yellow flowers to us, which were now already the size of sunflowers."⁷

⁷Aksyonov, Vassily, Surplussed Barrelware, ed. & transl. by Joel Wilkinson & Slava Yastremski (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), p. 94.

The barrels represent the misguided quest for Communism, Stalinism. They are empty shells, empty promises. Through their seductive qualities, however, they duped the travelers into working and sacrificing for nothing. At the end of each person's sojourn, each has received nothing. Despite the travelers' realization of this, the barrelware had the ability to keep them seduced, just as upon Stalin's death and the publication of his excesses, the masses continued to follow Stalin's heirs. For the most part, however, Aksyonov uses narrative about Stalin's excesses to highlight the intelligentsia's bitterness toward the past and its hatred toward the Stalinist functionaries still in power.

In The Burn, for example, Gennady reads with sarcastic contempt an excerpt from the Soviet encyclopedia, which describes Stalin as "the great architect of progressive humanity" and "his majesty the standard bearer of world peace, the generalissimo with the brain of a scholar, the body of a philosopher, and the garments of a simple centaur."⁸ The reading is immediately juxtaposed with a parody in which Stalin is likened to a "sea cow, now almost wholly exterminated by progressive mankind."⁹ Aksyonov frequently

⁸Vassily Aksyonov, The Burn, transl. by Michael Glenny (New York: Aventura, 1985), pp. 82-83.

⁹Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 81.

refers to Stalin's Regime and the Party sarcastically as "Unanimous Approval." The term itself is a parody of Party jargon and official diction commonly used by Party officials. In The Burn, the narrator reports, "one day, during a night of falling stars, in the early hours of a morning the color of dill pickles, with surly, dumb astonishment, Unanimous Approval occupied a fraternal socialist country to ensure that it was no longer fraternal but safely under its skin."¹⁰ The placement of such passages near characterizations of Stalin as progressive is clearly sarcastic.

In The Island of Crimea, Aksyonov is still more bitter: "It is our opinion that an important psychobiological aspect of the Great Russian Revolution remains insufficiently elucidated: a gradual but eventually overpowering takeover by incompetence and nonentities."¹¹ Aksyonov scathingly characterizes Stalin as the best example in world history of the incompetence of mediocrity. But, Aksyonov continues:¹²

"Stalin did not die in 1953. His presence is felt in a propaganda machine of unprecedented scope, in the sessions of the so-called Supreme Soviet, in the sham elections, in the rigidity of the contemporary Soviet leadership (or at least the group carrying on the legacy of Kalinin and Zhdanov and its aversion to reform), and the breakdown of human economy (food, clothing, services -- all areas

¹⁰Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 392.

¹¹Aksyonov, The Island of Crimea, pp. 241-242.

¹²Ibid.

of human existence are stymied by Stalinist dementia) and the growth of inhuman economy (tanks, rockets, bombs -- all means of destruction loom like a phantom of syphilitic delirium), and the rejection of all iconoclasm and the imposition of a stale, dated ideological boiler plate on a nation wide scale, and the spread of what is known as 'mature socialism' (and is in fact social and spiritual stagnation of the worst kind) beyond Soviet borders."

Aksyonov criticizes the conservatives. He is amazed that the Stalinists can maintain their power. His bitter summary: "[Y]esterday's Stalinist Russia rested on blood, today's rests on lies."¹³

In what appears to be a somewhat autobiographical memory of Khrushchev's censorship of Aksyonov in the late 1950s, Pantelei the writer, one of the five main personality-characters of The Burn, is called to the rostrum at a large gathering by the "High Priest", Nikita Kornponevich,¹⁴ a not-so-subtly disguised Khrushchev. In the middle of Pantelei's statement to the crowd, Kornponevich interrupts to degrade him before a large gathering of Socialist Realist writers:¹⁵

¹³Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁴The translator has used a surname which adopts the American word "corn pone" for its Russian equivalent to reflect Aksyonov's characterization of Khrushchev as a "hay seed" farmer from the vast and parochial Ukranian farming region, the breadbasket of the Soviet Union.

¹⁵Aksyonov, The Burn, pp. 119-120.

"'Are you proud that you aren't a communist? You heard him -- he's not a communist! But I'm a communist and I'm proud of it They've gone too far, you see. They write God knows what! They paint nothing but assholes! They make movies about shit in cesspools! Switch on the radio -- nothing but noisy ja[zz] music! . . . We won't let you start a seditious Petofi-style Writers' Club here!'"

Throughout Aksyonov's works, the writer denounces the excesses of Stalin. In his major works, particularly The Burn and The Island of Crimea, the main character criticizes the intelligentsia for allowing Stalinists to remain in power after Stalin's death but admits to himself in the end that the Party is still able to seduce the people, to maintain its authority.

The theme of betrayal underscores Aksyonov's and the thaw generation's questioning of the Soviet government's legitimacy. The theme of accountability goes beyond questioning. In demanding accountability from Stalin's Heirs, Aksyonov is clearly stating that until a new "agreement" or "compact" is achieved between the people and the state, the government must be illegitimate. Clearly, Aksyonov appeals in his works for a superior moral order beyond ideology, but that reality does not remove his works from the broader genre of political novels.¹⁶

¹⁶Howe, Politics and the Novel, p. 24.

C. A Search for Personal Identity

Another theme common in Aksyonov's works is struck in rebellious opposition to the historical theme of betrayal. It is the recurring practice of the thaw generation characters to search obsessively for identity. The characters rebel against Party exhortations to work for the State, to become yet another nameless entity among the army of workers. Most of the main characters that Aksyonov wants the reader to identify most with are thaw generation personalities. Each excels in some more urbane endeavor, be it music, sculpting, medicine, scientific research, writing or journalism. Each chooses to disassociate himself from the rank and file Communists. In one scene in The Burn, Pantelei, the writer, proudly states to his professional peers that he is not a Communist.¹⁷ In another scene, Pantelei overhears a young, secret agent assigned to follow him use the word "kid." "'Kid!'," Pantelei thinks, "He's one of us! The generation of Aksyonov's Ticket to the Stars!"¹⁸ "Kid," is a slang term used by the liberal intelligentsia.

In the persona of another personality in The Burn, the jazz musician, Samsik, tells an audience of bureaucrats, "like it or not, you Party-line apparatchiks, you Marxist pencil

¹⁷Aksyonov, The Burn, pp. 118-119.

¹⁸Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 165.

pushers, you can't eradicate that insignificant proportion of our otherwise ideologically healthy generation, and you will never completely stifle the European spirit that has always been a part of Russia!"¹⁹ These characters yearn for material goods popularized in the West. The youth wear American baseball shoes. Levi's sell at a premium, and main characters prefer Remy Martin brandy or Campari over Vodka drinks.

Identity comes to the younger thaw generation by disassociating itself from the Stalinist "old guard" generation. In his first novel, The Colleagues, the youthful, exuberant young doctors, Max and Sasha, are strolling down a boulevard in Leningrad when they are confronted by two older, worn and crippled World War II veterans. The veterans stop the young men in order to ask them what they live for.²⁰ "We knew where we were going at your age and why," said one of the veterans, "we stood to the death. We veterans still know what it's all about, but you, you young fellow -- all you know is how to stroll along the boulevard." Here Aksyonov uses the generational divisiveness of the thaw era to articulate the philosophies on both sides of the argument. The veterans walk away, and an argument ensues between Sasha, the more

¹⁹Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 415.

²⁰Vassily Aksyonov, The Colleagues, transl. by A. Brown (London: Praeger, 1962), pp. 20-22.

traditional-minded, and Max, the liberal intellectual. Max resents the older generation's demand for tribute. He deplores the older generation's use of its own sacrifice as a tool for belittling the untested younger generation. Max argues that he owes no tribute to the older generation since he is just as willing to sacrifice his life for his country. In other words, it is not the actual sacrifice that is important to Max, but the conviction that one will make such a sacrifice if called upon to do so. Sasha, on the other hand, articulates traditionalism. He is indebted to the older generation for its supreme sacrifice, for all of the lost lives, and for the suffering.²¹ At the end of the novel, Sasha is near death from sickness, and his old friend Max travels from a great distance to operate on him and save his life. Thus, Aksyonov, through his characters, strives not only for identity, but a superior identity where the younger generation through its intellect saves and outshines the older generation. This theme is revisited in The Burn when Gennady, the prominent surgeon and medical research scientist, uses his great invention Lymph D to save the life of his hated enemy, Chepstov, the personification of the old guard Stalinist.

²¹Ibid., p. 26.

In the late 1950s and especially the early 1960s, the young, thaw generation, liberal, intelligentsia was electrified. It was moving. The Burn tells the tale of numerous early morning meetings among the intelligentsia in which sharp, excited and hopeful minds developed the strategy for the creation of competing political parties within the Soviet system. The boundary between the rights and obligations of the people to the government and vice versa was being redefined; the social contract was being redrawn. The liberal intelligentsia was not clamoring for the arid hedonism and materialism of the West. It was an intelligentsia that believed in Socialism but in rights of the individual and social freedoms as well.

The movement was shortlived. "In the damp winter of 1966, Moscow put two such lads from one of our houses on trial. Then four more. Then more, singly, in pairs, in whole bunches. They demoted our professors, fired our theater directors, closed our cafes. The question that we raised as to the legitimacy of the single party system was decided, and in a sense that even forbade asking the question."²²

The very idea that Aksyonov's characters pursue, the quest for personal identity, is met headlong in each instance by the State's view that an individual is simply another cog

²²Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 391.

in the machine. Aksyonov's characters, from The Colleagues to The Island of Crimea and The Burn scream out for the attention of friends, colleagues, admirers. They strive to be unique. In short, they strive to be something the State has decided they should not be. They are, therefore, especially in Aksyonov's later works, seditious.

D. The Lethargic Intelligentsia and Failure

While attacks on Stalinism are common in all of Aksyonov's works, mocking, satirical criticisms of the Russian intelligentsia emerge in Aksyonov's later works. Early works are filled with hope and passionately articulated ideas of reform. The thaw generation was struggling at the time, after all, for greater individual expression. Subsequent works, however, evince Aksyonov's bitter resignation to the idea that the movement among the thaw generation intelligentsia had disintegrated in the face of the newly emergent neo-Stalinism of the 1960s. By the late 1960s, Aksyonov's works criticize the intelligentsia not only for allowing Stalin's corruption of the Great Russian Revolution, but also for its continued acquiescence to neo-Stalinism.

Aksyonov criticizes the intellectuals for their spiritual shallowness and their fetish for material goods. He also criticizes the generation for desiring security over freedom,

just as Alyosha Karamazov had criticized the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov. And while in The Burn, Aksyonov is highly critical of the intelligentsia's surrender, he seems to forgive the well-meaning, youthful movement that was never well-organized or directed. "How could the elitist liberals know that the Regime saw in their effusions a certain danger to the sacred pork-barrel system?"²³

In one sense, The Island of Crimea is itself a satire of the intelligentsia's wholesale surrender to Stalinism. Luchnikov is a wealthy playboy and prominent editor of the leading newspaper on the Western-oriented "island" of Crimea, a land that remained free under the protection of the White Army following the Great Russian Revolution. Luchnikov openly wants Crimea to revert back to Russian -- albeit Soviet -- control. He is overwhelmed by a sense of kinship with the mainland Russians and suggests that but for a fluke following the Revolution, Crimea should have remained Russian. Luchnikov's father, a wealthy, Crimean descendant of a White Army General advocates the status quo: preservation of a free Russian republic (somewhat analogous to the situation between Taiwan and The People's Republic of China). Luchnikov's son, actively supports a "separatist" movement which would have

²³Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 392.

Crimea completely disassociate itself from its Russian legacy. The Russian language and Russian traditions would be outlawed, and the country would adopt a new language (Yaki, a mixture of Russian, English and Tartar) and even closer ties to its Western allies.

Each persona heads a distinct political party on Crimea, and all of these groups together represent the Russian intelligentsia. The Soviets take advantage of the state of divisiveness created on Crimea by the Luchnicovs and ultimately invade and seize control of Crimea. Thus, totalitarian rule comes to Crimea through its own masters' indecisiveness.

In Our Golden Ironburg,²⁴ Aksyonov satirizes the efforts of a band of physicists, the intelligentsia, stationed at a remote Siberian outpost, who are in search of a mysterious but strategically important particle. The scientists willingly abandon desires for freedom in exchange for security and access to material goods. The Party allows these items in exchange for "technological advances", which -- for all Party officials know -- may or may not have been discovered.

Again, the negative inference drawn from the impotence of the intelligentsia is the illegitimacy of the totalitarian

²⁴Vassily Aksyonov, Our Golden Ironburg: A Novel with Formulas, transl. by Ronald E. Peterson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989).

government in Russia. Aksyonov castigates the liberal intelligentsia of the late 1950s and early 1960s for allowing the Stalinist and neo-Stalinists to remain in power. The inference, of course, is that the Stalinists and neo-Stalinists should not be in power.

E. Spiritual Fulfillment

A fourth theme subtly infused in most of Aksyonov's works is the intellectual's apprehension of greater meaning in life through spiritual fulfillment once he matures enough to learn that personal titles and material goods alone do not satisfy his search for personal identity. Critics have categorized Aksyonov's writings chronologically into three different periods which reflect his development and maturity. These phases or moods are termed "happy" (1958-1962), "angry" (1963-1970s), and "desperate" (early 1970s - 1980s).²⁵

In his "happy" period as a writer of stories involving youth, Aksyonov's characters derived personal fulfillment from their own youthful confidence and optimism. His heroes in The Colleagues, for example, demonstrate their moral integrity and professional abilities as doctors. In the end their future, and therefore the future of the Soviet Union, is bright.

²⁵Vishevsky and Pogacar, "The Function of Conventional Language Pattern in the Prose of Vasiliy Aksenov," in In Quest of Himself, p. 131.

Lesser characters in the work who lack such integrity are doomed to a life of misery. The optimism and self-confidence of youth is also central to Aksyonov's early story, A Ticket to the Stars,²⁶ a story which follows a group of high school graduates who will be continuing their educations at the University level. Contrary to tradition, however, they fly from their hometown to the Black Sea beaches for a vacation and to enjoy life before beginning their career pursuits at the University. Much of the story is a portrayal of their confrontations with various older individuals who scoff at and criticize their seemingly unjustifiable self-confidence. Ultimately, each member of the group goes on to lead a very successful life in his profession. The Party criticized A Ticket to the Stars as a story that would mislead Soviet youth, and certain Party members branded Aksyonov as a corrupter of youths.

In his "angry" phase, a time when betrayal is the preeminent theme in all his works, Aksyonov and his characters have lost the self-confidence of their youth. They can no longer believe that they or their generation can change the world, and a dark, melancholy void emerges in their lives. The characters find inner sanctity and comfort in seeking to

²⁶Vassily Aksyonov, A Ticket to the Stars, transl. by A. MacAndrew (New York: Random House, 1963).

understand universal ideas of love, truth, and justice. In The Steel Bird,²⁷ for example, Aksyonov satirizes the rise of a powerful "dictator," who much like Stalin emerges from an obscure past to seize control of an apartment building. Popenkov, in one of Aksyonov's first works of the absurd, is part man, part bird, and part steel. Initially, he is a homeless vagabond. The manager of an apartment building agrees to let him occupy an elevator at night. The tenants of the building begin to interact with him and decide they like him. When he becomes ill, the tenants all agree that he can occupy the elevator as long as he would want. Through playing on their sympathies, Popenkov persuades the tenants to block off the front door and staircase which forces the tenants to use the rear, service elevator. Gradually, he gains more and more power until he has persuaded some of the tenants to work for him. He even persuades the wife of an important minister to furnish his entranceway residence with valuable antique furniture from her apartment. His ultimate scheme is to get every tenant to work for him. Ultimately, the tenants revolt, and the manager announces that the tenants have been given a new, glass and steel apartment building.

²⁷Vassily Aksyonov, The Steel Bird: A Tale with Digressions and a Solo for Cornet, transl. by Rae Slonek, in Contemporary Russian Prose, ed. by Carl & Ellendea Proffer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982).

They all move away from Popenkov, who had practically taken over the entire older apartment building.

In The Steel Bird, Aksyonov is appealing to the people of the world, and particularly the Soviet Union, to not give in to the oppression of others. The Steel Birds are dictators who have seized control of entire societies through the use of guile, intrigue and propaganda. The tenants find the strength to conquer the Steel Bird and to create a new and beautiful order by resorting to inner strength and seeking truth and justice.

"Stalin once called the true Soviet man a screw in the machine of society. Man's emotions and his spiritual side have in this way . . . been neglected, while reason and technology have turned his arms into steel wings, his heart into a flaming motor."²⁸

By seeking to become more than a mere screw in the "machine" of society through spiritual enrichment and the power of ideas, man approaches more closely his deep seated goal of personal identity, since identity can be established only in a free society. "Good Person" represents the same form of spiritual idealism in Surplussed Barrelware. Spiritual and moral wholesomeness become mankind's source of hope, Spiritual and moral goodness and faith in a better world to

²⁸Johnson, John J., "Introduction: The Life and Works of Aksenov," in Aksenov, The Steel Bird and Other Stories, ed. by John J. Johnson, Jr. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), p. xxii.

come serve to uplift mankind from both the impersonal, deceit-filled mechanical world of the Soviet regime and the shallow and meaningless existence in the West where individualism has been taken so far that the greater good has been ignored.

Finally, in his desperate phase, Aksyonov finds more than a source of hope in spiritual wholesomeness. He finds salvation. By the 1970s, Aksyonov's works begin to display a greater spiritual depth than ever before: Jesus Christ becomes an answer for the first time in The Burn. Perhaps, Aksyonov has lost all hope for even inner peace and freedom of mind, and he comes to see that true peace and freedom can be found only in heaven. In the closing pages of The Burn, the main personalities/characters, reunified in one entity, the "Victim", confront God who tells the frustrated and morally tormented Victim:

"God is only good and only love and never evil. Know that whenever you feel goodness and love, or delight, or pity, or something even more sublime, you are coming nearer to God. . . . At this moment you are surrounded by the terrible symbols of your own unhappiness, but God sends you thoughts of Himself, and that is hope. Await, like all who await His Son, and await the moment . . ."²⁹

Likewise, in the closing pages of The Island of Crimea, Luchnikov's grandson, Anton, Anton's lover, infant, and close friend are fleeing the Soviet invasion by boat. They are

²⁹Aksyonov, The Burn, pp. 525-526.

unarmed, and in a final, desperate attempt to save themselves from a pursuing attack helicopter, they lie down in the boat and form their bodies into crosses, and the invaders spare their lives.

As recently as 1985, following an Easter service at a Washington, D.C. Russian Orthodox cathedral, Aksyonov wrote about remembering crowds of drunken, uncomprehending youths kicking over churchyard fences and compared these memories to recent broadcasts of Easter service being celebrated in Moscow: "Perhaps, after nearly seven decades of militant atheism, Russians see the meaning of Easter as a protest against Marxist primitivism. The next step is for it to turn back into a normal, joyous holiday."³⁰

Certainly, one can see the evolution of the theme of spirituality progress in Aksyonov's works from the point of being virtually non-existent to becoming the sole, last hope of mankind. Conversely, the analogue to spirituality, man's belief in himself as the vehicle for salvation, is eventually eclipsed by his quest for spiritual depth.

As Irving Howe wrote, the political novel is distinguished from the social novel in that "the idea of society, as distinguished from the mere unquestioned workings of society, has penetrated the consciousness of the characters

³⁰Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby, p. 176.

in all of its profoundly problematic aspects, so that there is to be observed in their behavior, and they are themselves often aware of, some coherent political loyalty or ideological identification."³¹

Ideology is central to the actions of Aksyonov's characters. In his earlier (1958-1962) and middle (1963 - 1970) works, Aksyonov's characters may not be cast as those who would pick up the flag and rally the troops, but each of the main characters from these two periods of Aksyonov's career reveal in their words and actions that they are aware of the totalitarian identity of their government and their own ideological leanings away from those of the State. That is, their own personal dilemmas stem from an intolerable degree of government control in their lives. The leading characters in The Colleagues and Half-way to the Moon, for example, are not by the definition fixed by the Writer's Union true positive heroes. They speak in colloquial Russian as opposed to Standard Russian. They travel, and they articulate their material desires. They speak openly of sex as compared to the Socialist Realist positive hero who never raises the subject. Most importantly, they question the motives and actions of

³¹Howe, Politics and the Novel, p. 19.

Stalin, Stalin's functionaries, World War II veterans, and even their own parents.

By the middle period of Aksyonov's career, as exemplified by Surplussed Barrelware and especially The Steel Bird, Aksyonov's characters not only question Stalin's regime, but they also conclude that it was savagely wrong. The characters arrive at the opinion that they are not merely screws in the great machine of society and that they should dwell on such economically non-productive activities as pondering universal and spiritual truths, such as the meaning of justice and answering the question of when is the right time to revolt against tyranny.

Finally, in the later and more recent stage of Aksyonov's career, his characters actively participate in movements that would change the existing form of government within the Soviet Union. In The Burn, the personality/characters either act contrary to directives from Party authorities or they participate directly in movements that have as their goal political change. Kunitser and his friend Argentov, as well as Pantelei, are self-avowed "social democrats" and not Communists.

In The Island of Crimea, each Luchnikov -- the main character, his father and son -- serves as Aksyonov's foil for a grand political debate among Capitalist-Republicans,

Socialists, and Communists. The tenets of a number of political ideologies are argued in bars, newspaper editorials, news broadcasts, private telephone conversations, and at political rallies. Likewise, in Our Golden Ironburg, top Soviet scientists, consciously exchange their personal freedom (what little they would have had) for security and material goods from the government. Their reasons for doing so are mockingly explored by the young writer, Memozov.

Much of Aksyonov's work is autobiographical,³² and it is no surprise that the themes of political discord between the Soviet State and its people are attributable to Aksyonov's own experiences in the political movement of the thaw generation's liberal intelligentsia. Aksyonov's characters' clearly have an acute sense of political consciousness, as Aksyonov did, and their actions and thoughts are governed by their own common ideology, which is as much an anti-ideology to that of the Stalinists as it is an ideology in its own right. The dominant affectation of almost all of Aksyonov's characters is their ideological identification, and for all of these reasons Aksyonov's novels, especially his later works, are certainly political novels.

³²Johnson, "Life and Works," p. 10.

CHAPTER III

THE QUEST OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA -- OR, FANTASIES OF FREEDOM: SEXY WOMEN, FAST CARS, BLISSFUL BOOZE AND WANTON JAZZ

As a thaw generation writer, Aksyonov uses a number of literary and stylistic devices to communicate his genre's position regarding the popular struggle against Stalinism and socialist realism and to heighten popular awareness of the gravity of the struggle. Four prominent tools or devices are (1) the use of women as symbols of both the Russian homeland and the big lie, (2) escapism in the form of decadence, (3) the use of the grotesque to draw the reader more deeply, emotionally, into the work, and (4) the use of 'hip' colloquialisms, especially to the extent they are juxtaposed with the stuffy rhetoric of the Party. This chapter will focus on Aksyonov's use of these four devices.

A. Women as Symbols of the Rodina and Socialist Realism

Women are used widely in Aksyonov's works, particularly as symbols. Precisely what they symbolize, however, is subject to interpretation.¹ A recent analysis concludes that

¹Lauridsen, I., "Beautiful Ladies in the Works of Vasily Aksyonov," in In Quest of Himself, p. 102; Dalgard, The Grotesque, pp. 115-116.

women are used as "twin images of angel and monster,"² as a "saintly whore."³ The commentator provides numerous examples of the "twin images," but fails to explain persuasively the importance or the meaning of such symbolism. She concludes that the dichotomy is employed to articulate Aksyonov's view that women are simultaneously very different from men, but, of course, human, and that women are the archetypal figure of life in two senses.⁴

First, she argues that only women experience both the passing of life -- death -- and the giving of life -- birth. Second, she argues that women are represented both as maternal -- symbolizing growth, nurturing and release -- and as primitive, the anima-archetype which lures man to interact sexually with her resulting in his spiritual development and fulfillment.⁵ Perhaps there is something to such an analysis, since Aksyonov certainly does not write unidimensionally, but it is more probable that the commentator has overlooked the richness and depth of the "twin images" of women in Aksyonov's

²Ibid., p. 103.

³Ibid., p. 117.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.; Neumann, E., "The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype," in *The Bollinger Series*, vol. XLVII (1955).

works, because -- like other critics -- she fails to analyze Aksyonov from a political perspective.⁶

To argue, as at least one commentator has,⁷ that Aksyonov is not a political writer is unfathomable. "[T]he political novel . . . is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behavior and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology."⁸ The political novelist's task is "always to show the relation between theory and experience, between the ideology that has been preconceived and the tangle of feelings and relationships he is trying to present."⁹

Notwithstanding others, one thing rings true throughout Aksyonov's works: while a core theoretic foundation of the Revolution was founded in altruism and true regard for a better society, the "Purpose," the dream and quest for Communism, was grotesquely corrupted by Stalin and his functionaries with a deplorably genocidal result. The Russian people had been plunderously betrayed. What is worse, the

⁶"Contributors," in In Quest of Himself, p. 271; Dalgard, The Grotesque, pp. 114-115.

⁷Dalgard, The Grotesque, pp. 114-115.

⁸Howe, Politics and the Novel, p. 20.

⁹Ibid., p. 22.

madness of the great lie continues under the iron rule of Stalin's successors after unequivocal enlightenment. To ignore the fundamentally political underpinnings of Aksyonov's works is to ignore the source of the human suffering he sees in the Soviet regime.¹⁰

The meaning of the twin images of women becomes clear given Aksyonov's political perspective. Woman, in Aksyonov's works, is the Rodina, the Russian Homeland or Motherland. Along the developmental continuum, she begins as a young, chaste, beautiful and innocent girl. She is pre-Revolutionary Russia. But in an almost Christ-like act of charity and love, she allows herself to be corrupted by evil in order to save the Russian people, the Russian spirit. This is an act of love for the woman. The Russian people, the male characters of Aksyonov's works are selfishly offended and mistake her sacrifice for self-indulgence. She becomes the whore, the cheat, the betrayer. Only at the last moment does the male persona overcome his selfishness to see that despite her apparent infidelity and corruption, she has remained, not chaste, but truly innocent, loyal and -- above all -- loving.

This theme of the twin imagery of women parallels and adds dimension to the more starkly related historical account

¹⁰Interviews of Aksyonov and Malkimov, in In Quest of Himself, pp. 24, 30.

of the rape of the Rodina by Stalinism and socialist realism. The concept of Rodina includes more than the Russian land, but the Russian people and their common heritage as well. It evokes nationalism and patriotism, but is void of ideology.¹¹ While Stalinism has soiled and corrupted the Rodina, the Rodina is still innocent and, despite her defilement, uncorrupted and void of ideology. She is still loving.

In The Burn, for example, the rape of Masha Coulagot at the Katanga hospital is representative of this recurring theme.¹² A main character, Gennady Apollonarievich Malkolmov, is stationed as a U.N. doctor at the hospital. Masha is a nun and a nurse there. Gennady is in love with Masha. At one point the hospital is invaded by savage mercenaries, and in an act of supreme sacrifice, Masha gives herself sexually to the mercenaries in order to save the hospital staff and patients from certain death. When Masha has disappeared into another room with the mercenaries, Gennady selfishly considers that Masha is nothing but a whore and that she is enjoying the sexual assault. Then, only at the last minute, did he reconsider. "[O]nly then did we remember Masha. She was sitting in the corner, her head on her knees, her shoulders

¹¹Laszlo Tikos, Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies, University of Massachusetts, interview in Amherst, Massachusetts, January, 1988.

¹²Aksyonov, The Burn, pp. 69-75.

shaking. We lifted her up. 'Oh boys,' she cried, laying her head trustingly on my chest, then on Patrick's. What had they done to her? I was ashamed to ask and -- this was strange -- my feelings of male prestige had vanished, and I realized at last I was only thinking of her and not myself."¹³

Between the time of his selfish delusions regarding Masha's motives and the time he acted with Patrick Thunderjet to kill the mercenaries and save Masha, he considers at length the pros and cons of acting in her defense. "Suppose no one backed me up? In that case, I would be swatted like a fly. All my heroism would go down the tubes, and to no purpose: They would have raped Masha and rubbed me out."¹⁴ Gennady then prays for divinely infused strength and fury to defend his beloved Masha, and his prayer is answered.

This single vignette captures well the overall political message of The Burn. Gennady, representative of the Russian intelligentsia, stands by idly while Stalin siezes power and proceeds to rape the Rodina. All the while, the intelligentsia selfishly entertains rationalizations of its own powerlessness to arrest the crime. The metaphor's relation to reality ends here, though, since the intelligentsia is still fumbling with its rationalizations. The popular movement of

¹³Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 75.

¹⁴Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 73.

the thaw generation raises hope that delivery is at hand, but -- as Aksyonov concludes -- the hope soon disintegrates.

Aksyonov uses the same metaphor more expansively in the character of Alisa. In a Magadan prison camp, the adolescent persona of the main, character, Tolya Von Steinbok, witnesses the arrival of another batch of women prisoners. All are already corrupt and filthy. All but one. Tolya beholds the seventeen year old Alisa, and through her rags and filth, he sees instantly her beauty and chastity. "He realized at once that it was His Girl . . . 'the one and only girl of my whole life!'"¹⁵ He fantasized of saving her from her indulgent captors, but when in reality she beckoned to him, he did not respond.

Throughout The Burn, Alisa appears in the dreams of the five adult, manifestations of the original character, Tolya. She is their ideal type of the undefiled, the innocent, the virtuous woman, the woman they want to escape with from society. The characters become reacquainted with Alisa later in the novel only to find that she has become a whore among the social circles of the political elite of Moscow. Like Gennady at Katanga, their first inclination is to brand her as a slut, and they lament the corruption and ruination of their ideal type.

¹⁵Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 233.

In the end, however, when the characters are recast into the form of a single entity -- "the Victim," Alisa comes back to the Victim. At first, even in the course of making love, the Victim does not trust her, thinks of her as only a whore, "a priestess of love, a lionness." He enters into sexual relations with her out of only carnal desire. But in the midst of their act, he is able to see more deeply.

"She was forty-three years old, after all, and in that time she had gotten used to lying under a man with her eyes shut, but I knew then that I had to open them, open them at all costs and without saying a word, without ordering her, and so I began to open them, open them, open them, with even a certain fury, until she began to groan, to wail, until she opened her eyes, and in them I suddenly saw a joyful, astonished little girl and not a lioness at all.¹⁶

The Burn does not end happily, however. The Victim's mind has become jaded, and, beset with paranoia, he thinks that Alisa is attempting to betray him. His ultimate means of escape is suicide, and in his moment of dying, God comes to him to tell him that there is still hope, but only on a spiritual level. Alisa is there, holding him, lamenting his fate.

Aksyonov uses women symbolically on another level as well. Women are employed as temptresses. They are beautiful and seductive. Cast in this role, they are Stalinism and

¹⁶Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 497.

socialist realism. They charm and seduce the common man only to betray him in the end. Their beauty and charm is the emptiness of the promise and Stalin's betrayal of the people.

In Half-way to the Moon,¹⁷ for example, the main character, a lumber-truck driver, goes on vacation and, on his flight, discovers Tanya, the young and beautiful stewardess. She performs her task as hostess for him in an exceedingly charming manner. He becomes so smitten by her that he spends his entire vacation and all of his life's savings flying back and forth across the Soviet Union, the distance from the earth to half-way to the moon, just to be able to be near her and see her. In the end, it becomes clear that her charm is false and rendered only for the sake of her duties as a stewardess, for the good of the Purpose. Everything good that he had ever imagined about her was illusory.

Likewise, the barrels in Surplussed Barrelware take on feminine qualities. The Russian word for barrel is feminine. To the extent Aksyonov personifies the barrelware, he does so to accentuate its femininity. In actuality the barrels are used and decrepit. The characters who come into contact with them, however, look upon them differently, depending on each's own position in Soviet society.

¹⁷Aksyonov, Vassily, Half-way to the Moon, in Blake & Hayward, M., eds., Half-way to the Moon (New York: Praeger, 1963).

As explained earlier, Surplussed Barrelware is the account of the journey of a few citizens, all of whom accompany the main character who is hauling barrels to the county seat for redemption. Six people make the trip. Two young people, a marine and an attractive school teacher, participate, as do two middle-aged individuals, the driver and a bureaucrat/intellectual. Two elderly persons, an old crank, pensioner, and an old peasant woman who became a scientist late in life. All of the individuals except the driver must occupy a barrel to make the trip.

The younger people have little concern for the barrelware. They ride inside them, seemingly, because fate would have them do so, but they are distracted by each other, fantasize about one another, and eventually consummate their sexual fantasies. Theirs is a very individualistic and material view of life. The middle-aged characters seem to be seduced by the barrels. They are still enraptured and still oblivious to the betrayal that awaits them. Their feelings toward the barrels are rendered by Aksyonov as love. They are constantly tending to them, making sure they are safe. The elderly view the barrelware with indifference. The woman, a practicing Christian, and the old crank pensioner ride in the barrels as a matter of pure necessity.

When the travelers arrive at the provincial capital, the reader learns that the barrels are worthless. The authorities reject them for redemption. In their blind infatuation for the barrels and out of their sense of need, the travelers all get back into their barrels and, although each has reached his destination, they continue on with no indication as to where they shall go. Their journey becomes a dreamlike search for spiritual truths.¹⁸

The barrels represent the misguided quest for the Purpose, Stalinism. They are empty shells, empty promises. Through their seductive qualities they duped the people into working their whole lives for nothing. At the end of each person's sojourn, each has received nothing. And even upon such a realization, the barrelware had the ability to keep the pilgrims seduced, just as upon Stalin's death and the publication of his excesses, the masses continued to follow Stalin's heirs.

Thus, in expanding upon earlier but incomplete interpretations of the symbolic and thematic use of women in Aksyonov's works, it becomes clear that Aksyonov uses women and feminine qualities metaphorically to communicate his political message. Woman is often portrayed as the temptress, the seducer of men, as a symbol of Stalinism's corruption of

¹⁸Aksyonov, Surplussed Barrelware, p. 94.

the Revolution and betrayal of the Russian people. She is also used as a symbol of the enduring innocence and nurturing qualities of the Rodina and as a symbol for continuing hope, especially when coupled with faith in God and the growth of spiritual enlightenment.

B. Decadence as Escapism: Sex, Booze, Cars and Jazz

Most of Aksyonov's characters, with the exception of those of The Colleagues,¹⁹ are much like those of The Burn in their common resort to sex, alcohol, jazz or even fast cars as a means of withdrawing from society. In The Island of Crimea, Aksyonov argues that socialist realism is the source of decadence in the Soviet Union:

"What is decadence, after all, but complete and utter cultural demoralization, degeneration, decay, aesthetic syphilis, and what have I just described if not, you'll excuse the expression, socialist realism? There's no degeneration or decay in modernism, in any avant-garde art. The whole point of the avant-garde is to shake things up, put new

¹⁹In Colleagues, Aksyonov comes the closest to Socialist Realism than in any of his other works. It is important to note, however, that Colleagues is Aksyonov's first work of significance. Little is startling in Colleagues except various positions taken by the characters Sasha and Max in the popular struggle and generational conflict following Stalin's death. In the end, conflicting ideologies are made symbolically harmonious through the reunion of the three main characters (during Sasha's operation). See also Busch, R.L., "The Exotic in the Early Novellas of Aksenov," in In Quest of Himself, p. 54.

blood into circulation. If what you want is honest-to-goodness decadence, then try socialist petrified realism. . . ."²⁰

Thus, decadence is escapism and is used as a metaphorical crossing over into another state, a broadening of one's horizons.²¹

Especially in his later writings, Aksyonov describes sexual interludes very graphically. The act of sex, itself, is symbolic, especially to the extent that it is either forced or deviant.²² Sex is not taboo in post-Revolutionary Russian literature as, until recently, it has been in the West.²³ Christianity, on the other hand, is rarely dealt with by Russian authors during the same period other than in denegrating fashion. The Bolshevik Revolution attempted to overturn the traditional mores of Tsarist Russia entirely. Christians were persecuted, and the Purpose became the all consuming religious surrogate for the masses. But Communism was corrupt from the beginning. Unlike Christianity, the Purpose never

²⁰Aksyonov, Island of Crimea, p. 140.

²¹Vassily Aksyonov, interview reprinted in In Quest of Himself, p. 25.

²²E.g., Chepstov's rape of step-daughter, Aksyonov, The Burn, pp. 343-344; Rhadik's manage a' trois, Ibid., pp. 426-427.

²³Laszlo Tikos, Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies, University of Massachusetts, interview in Amherst, Massachusetts, January, 1988.

harbored any analogue to sexual restraint as a virtue, since the Purpose and the implementation of Communism were never chaste.²⁴

"Funnily enough," the narrator in The Burn muses after a racy menage a' trois takes place, "it was just this 'debauchery' that now maintained their inner calm and equilibrium."²⁵

In fast, sleek sports cars, Aksyonov's middle-aged characters regain youth and its ignorance of mortality. Aksyonov personifies the cars as seductive women. Engines "purr," while a drive train "shutters" at the release of the clutch like a woman having an orgasm. The cars are responsive to the male imperative. Escapism in the form of fast cars is especially prominent in The Island of Crimea, with Luchnikov and his Peter Turbo.

Jazz, too, is a symbol of freedom. Aksyonov's prose style suddenly changes to free form when he attempts to translate the tones and melodies of Samsik's saxophone. The meter of these musical interludes in the original Russian is rhythmic.²⁶ Recounting the jazzy improvisations provides

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 427.

²⁶B. Briker, "In the Search of a Genre: The Meaning of the Title and the Idea of a 'Genre'," in In Quest of Himself, p. 149.

Aksyonov with an outlet for improvising with his prose. In one scene in The Burn, Samsik's saxaphonic wails are translated:

"I am poor,
 poor,
 poor,
 Tell everybody I haven't gotta cent!
 I am poor,
 poor,
 poor,
 Tell everybody I haven't any rights!
 Tell everybody I was conceived on rags in a
 prison hospital
 By two enemies of the people,
 a Trotskyite man and a Bukharinite woman
 in a shameful act"²⁷

Samsik debuted in 1956 with a group of radical teenagers in Leningrad, the first Leningrad jazzmen, before a mixed audience of Komsomol and 'new wave' youth. The leader of the group began, "Kiss my ass! Your Big Daddy has kicked the bucket, so we're going to play you some jazz!"²⁸ The group began to play. "The spirit of disobedience, the idea of freedom, dashed from wall to wall like a mindless lunatic."²⁹

Commenting recently on jazz, Aksyonov mused:

"Why did we love it so? Perhaps for the same reason the Communists (and Nazis before them) hated it. For its refusal to be pinned down, its improvisatory nature. Living as we did in a totalitarian society, we needed relief from the structures of our minutely

²⁷Aksyonov, The Burn, p. 34.

²⁸Ibid., p. 35.

²⁹Ibid., p. 34.

controlled everyday lives, of the five-year plans, of historical materialism. Traveling to Europe, especially to Eastern Europe, jazz became more than music; it took on an ideology or, rather, an anti-ideology. Jazz was a platonic rendezvous with freedom."³⁰

Alcohol proved to be another escape route into a freer, less structured world. A common Russian habit of drinking in threes, even among strangers, allows a group of individuals to travel "to other worlds together" through the exchange of stories and anecdotes. In a drunken state, Aksyonov's characters were able to live life in a carnival-like environment. Drunkenness also provides the author with innumerable opportunities to make use of the grotesque.

C. Aksyonov's Use of the Grotesque

Aksyonov follows a long but punctuated tradition of Russian writers who have deep roots in the people -- the tradition of the folk carnival.³¹ "The grotesque, being a combination of the fantastic and the realistic, of avant-gardism and realism, is fundamental to Aksyonov's works."³² "The dislocation into grotesquerie and unreality in my fiction

³⁰Aksyonov, Melancholy Baby, p. 203.

³¹Dalgard, The Grotesque, p.5; Vassily Aksyonov, interview reprinted in In Quest of Himself, p. 24.

³²Dalgard, The Grotesque, p. 5.

leads to greater depths³³ . . . without the grotesque, I just can't work."³⁴ In his rich use of the grotesque, Aksyonov is said to rival Gogol and Belyy.³⁵

According to one popular theory of the grotesque, folk lore or folk culture is the source of the grotesque.³⁶ This folklorish, carnival life style is expressed in three different ways: through the visual form of the carnival or ritual act itself, through laughter and comic tales, and through free and easy burlesque dialogue.³⁷ The grotesque may be rendered other than stylistically and, in Aksyonov's work, is often cast in the composition and plot of the work, itself. The motifs of travel and flight blend well with the grotesque, further accentuating the carnival atmosphere intended. In literature it is often called "surrealism."

Flight as escapism is used as a recurring theme in many of Aksyonov's works, including Half-way to the Moon, The Burn, The Island of Crimea, Surplussed Barrelware, and The Steel

³³Vassily Aksyonov, quoted in Dalgard, The Grotesque, p. 5.

³⁴Vassily Aksyonov, interview reprinted in In Quest of Himself, p. 24.

³⁵Dalgard, "Literary Roots," pp. 68-69.

³⁶Dalgard, The Grotesque, p. 9 (relying on Bakhtin's Theory of the Grotesque).

³⁷Ibid.

Bird. Travel, generally, is used as a motif of escapism, symbolizing delivery from oppression. Aksyonov uses a form of the pilgrimage in Surplussed Barrelward to augment character development, for as the characters are more fully revealed to the reader and as surely as they develop spiritually and morally, they also progress through time and space along the journey.

In all but his earlier works, however, Aksyonov often eschews a chronological narration and staging of events. Rather, the reader must endure numerous flashbacks and "flashforwards". In one paragraph, the characters might be brawling in Moscow, and in the next they are putting flowers in the barrels of assault rifles of Soviet infantrymen in the Crimea.

In The Burn, even the main character is subdivided into five distinct "personalities". Tolya Von Steinbock, the adolescent main character who grew up in a prison camp with his exiled mother and step-father, grows up to be five adult characters or, more precisely, personalities: A surgeon, a physicist, a sculptor, a writer, and a jazz musician. The narration follows each of these personalities, jumping back and forth among them in no obvious pattern, and flashing back from each to various vignettes involving Tolya, their common youth. This vibrant style does not allow the reader to

empathize with or relate to any one character, place, or time before the author uproots him and places him in another setting. This style underscores the desperateness and hopelessness Aksyonov came to see in the lives of the intellectuals absent some spiritual foundation.

But why have Aksyonov and other thaw writers insisted on using the grotesque? As Siniavskii noted, socialist realism is anything but realistic. "In our works of glorification resound ever more openly the notes of baseness and hypocrisy. The most successful [socialist realist] writers are those who can present our achievements as truthfully as possible and our failings as tactfully, delicately, and untruthfully as possible."³⁸ Socialist realism is impotent for two reasons. First, because it must by definition tow the Party line, it is extremely predictable and, therefore, offers no avenues of artistic expression. Second, in our complicated, hi-tech world, we have become ever more disciplined rationalists. Sophisticated audiences no longer believe the stodgy, hackneyed lies of socialist realism.

On the other hand, traditional forms of literature no longer offer viable forms for many of the same reasons. Romanticism, for instance, is too emotional and never precise enough to appeal to rationalists. "As art became more

³⁸Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, pp. 93-94.

precise, rational, and teleological, it squeezed out romanticism."³⁹ Classicism is inadequate due to the characteristics it shares with socialist realism. The overuse of epithets and euphemisms, reliance on pathos instead of irony and laughter, and lackluster solemnity are no longer fresh and exciting. The grotesque, that is, being truthful with the aid of the absurd and the fantastic, coupled with an "unscripted" exploration into social, political, moral or even psychological realms have greater appeal than dry, over-realistic descriptions of ordinary life. We live 'realism' everyday. Life becomes routine all too easily. The grotesque appeals to the rationalist audience because it is not ordinary, because it shocks, because it stirs up emotion and consciousness. It allows one to tap more primitive, emotional and, perhaps, especially when coupled with decadence as in Aksyonov's works, baser reaches of one's self.

D. Colloquial Diction as a Device to Accentuate
The Differing Ideologies of Generations

In Colleagues, Aksyonov frames for the first time the struggle between the Stalinists and, to a lesser extent, the older generation, and the vibrant, hopeful youth, or thaw

³⁹Ibid., p. 82.

generation. This generational conflict is redrawn over and over again throughout Aksyonov's works. The younger characters, more often the intelligentsia, think that the older generation has grown overly complacent with Communism. They are contemptuous of those who persecuted or even killed millions of innocent people at Stalin's command and reject accountability for their actions. They struggle for greater personal freedoms and the recognition of individuality.

The older generation, especially the chekists, are disdainful of what they regard as a spoiled, disrespectful youth. They are angered that the young do not appreciate their life-long sacrifice to the Purpose and the building of a better country for the next generation. Youth is weak because it has been untempered by war and genocide.

But the generational rift is merely a single manifestation of a greater evil, the apparent intractability of Stalinism and the Purpose. Socialist realism is the official literary ideology of the Soviet Union. Elements of form are rather programmatic and socialist realists disregard the word as a creative end in itself.⁴⁰ Their prose is sterile, drab and stereotyped.⁴¹ Thus, at the time of Stalin's death, even literary style was highly structured. Aksyonov is a maverick

⁴⁰Rzhevsky, "The New Idiom," p. 69.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 74.

in his virtual disregard and blatant rejection of socialist realism after publication of Colleagues.

Aksyonov heightens the differences between the generations in the dialogue. Youth's speech is peppered with a strong hint of the "Beat" or "new wave" movement. Characters refer to "chicks," "cool dudes," and "babes." There is also a great deal of vulgarity and profanity, although their offensiveness is undercut by their juxtaposition with religious, metaphysical and moralistic speech.⁴² The older generation speaks just as the Writer's Union would have any socialist realist speak. Aksyonov artfully parodies Soviet officialese. Characters mockingly refer to State officials and Komsomol members as "hey you, Unanimous Approval!"⁴³ In The Burn, the multi-personality main character refers sarcastically to "Chapter Four of Stalin's Short Course on Marxism and its 'solely correct and truly scientific view of the world'."⁴⁴

Through sarcasm and parody, Aksyonov shows disgust for Party propaganda and its ubiquity. "The sky was alive with soundless peel of freedom," sighs the narrator in The Island of Crimea. The main character then comes immediately upon an

⁴²Dalgard, The Grotesque, pp. 96-97.

⁴³Aksyonov, The Burn, pp. 29, 80.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 124.

endless vista of party signs: "THE SOVIET PEOPLE KNOW -- THE PARTY MEANS SUCCESS AND VICTORY . . . ART BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE . . . THE PLANS OF THE PARTY ARE THE PLANS OF THE PEOPLE . . . !" Each party message is intermixed with the character's perception of the world around him. The narrator's statement, "the freshly polished cross of a country church," is immediately followed by the next item in the character's line of vision, another placard: "WE PLEDGE TO FULFILL THE RESOLUTIONS OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH PARTY CONGRESS!"⁴⁵ A freshly polished cross is itself an oxymoron in the Soviet Union.

Throughout Aksyonov's works, the author laments through parody and irony the Sovietization of the Russian language. The slang articulated by the youth is strikingly similar to the dialect and diction of the prisoners of the Gulags, who are themselves outcasts of socialist society.⁴⁶ That the youth ape such speech patterns is yet another device Aksyonov uses to distance the younger generation from the old, the avant-garde from the traditional. Youth's mocking use and bastardization of High Soviet language, particularly the

⁴⁵Aksyonov, Island of Crimea, p. 127.

⁴⁶Laszlo Tikos, Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies, University of Massachusetts, interview in Amherst, Massachusetts, January, 1988. Sozhenitsyn also made wide use of slang dialogue in One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich and his other works.

rhetoric, the lies and the euphemisms, symbolize the growing cynicism of the thaw generation and the staleness of the Purpose.

Aksyonov's works represent an intent to shake off the shackles of time and the restrictive government-imposed literary form. His split personality figures and the use of dreams borrow from the literary tradition of Gogol, Belyy and Dostoevsky. Aksyonov, however, is an innovator to the extent he seeks to internationalize the Russian literary art form.⁴⁷ He makes frequent allusions not only to a vast number of Soviet and Russian writers, poets, artists, musicians, actors, playwrights and film producers, but to such from around the world, including Hemingway, Homer, Balzac, John Wayne, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Salinger, and Vonnegut. Aksyonov also constructs a number of passages in French, German, Latin and Greek, and, especially in The Burn, he makes numerous allusions to the myths of ancient Greece.

⁴⁷Laszlo Tikos, Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies, University of Massachusetts, interview in Amherst, Massachusetts, January, 1988.

As Siniavskii presciently noted, the thaw generation was in search of a genre, a new literary tradition which very much reflected its political expectations and ideology.⁴⁸ Ak-syonov's stories, plays and poetry reflect his generation's reasoned attempt to break from the generation of its fathers, and to resist the grip of Stalinism.

⁴⁸Siniavskii, On Socialist Realism, pp. 71-95.

CONCLUSION

A study of Aksyonov's work from a political perspective is of quite some value since no other such analysis has been done. Moreover, those commentators and critics who have examined Aksyonov's works from other perspectives, such as literary and social, have concluded that Aksyonov's works are not political. While such an analysis is admittedly subjective to some degree, every attempt has been made to lend objectivity to this study by adopting Irving Howe's definition of the political novel and by slavishly following the parameters for the study of political novels he sets forth in his work, Politics and the Novel. Following Howe's methodology, this study has examined the themes, symbols, and style of Aksyonov's novels in order to verify the thesis that Aksyonov's novels are in fact political novels. This study has also reviewed the historical and political context of Aksyonov's formative and productive years.

Aksyonov's generation was born during the midst of Stalin's great purges during the 1930s, a time when millions of "Soviet" citizens were taken from their homes and killed by Stalin's security forces. While such incidents may not have been widely reported, they certainly did not go unnoticed

by the surviving population. During this period and the great war that followed, Soviet children read of Soviet heroes in the highly structured socialist realist works of that time.

World War II and the period that followed, however, was a period of increased Western, predominantly American, influence within the Soviet Union. More urbane and prominent adolescents revered the Americans and adopted American expressions and colloquialisms and, as best they could with what they had, copied American fashion. The more intelligent and financially able ("better connected") young people read American and Western authors in translation.¹

Following Stalin's death, a small group of intellectuals was emboldened to speak out against Stalin's atrocities. Khrushchev took advantage of this vocal minority whose artistic arm became known in both the West and the Soviet Union as the thaw generation. The thaw period was brief, only a decade which in turn was interrupted by a three year neo-Stalinist backlash. The neo-Stalinists eventually regained control following the national embarrassment of Khrushchev's foreign policy and the failures of his economic reforms and "redirected" the Soviet artistic community.

¹Aksyonov mentions all of these matters regarding the intellectual youth's veneration of American culture in his non-fictional work, In Search of Melancholy Baby.

Much of Aksyonov's work is autobiographical. His works are political because he himself was caught up in political affairs. Being half Jewish and the son of two exiled, enemies of the state, his own arrest as a young man for only those reasons was narrowly averted by the political turmoil following Stalin's death. He became nationally popular as a writer very early in his career, certainly by the time he was 28 years old. As a prominent writer, his works were carefully scrutinized by the the Party's Writer's Union, and he was even once asked by Khrushchev, himself, to recant certain politically unacceptable statements.

For Aksyonov's generation, coming to the age of majority and adult responsibility during a time of great political unrest and change, it surely must have been a time of great expectation and political idealism for at least the young intellectuals. And while they, unlike their Chinese counterparts in Tiananmen Square thirty years later, may not have been crying for the installation of a democratic republic, they certainly articulated a desire for a less totalitarian form of government.

The thaw generation writers including Aksyonov must be credited with leading a minority of artists away from the Party's school of Socialist Realism. Thaw writers, and especially Aksyonov, must be credited with the creation of a

wholly different genre of literature. These writers rejected not only Socialist Realism, but also Romanticism, Classicism, and even Realism. With Aksyonov as their vanguard, the thaw writers sought to create a wholly distinct and pure form of literature. Surrealism, or the "grotesque," and cosmopolitanism are primary characteristics of these works. Therefore, Aksyonov must be regarded as one of the principal creators of the very distinct genre of literature produced by the thaw generation of the Soviet Union.

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