

Construction and Tradition: The Making of 'First Wave' Russian Émigré Identity

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Preface

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Introduction:
Setting the Stage for Exile

The history of communities in exile and their efforts to maintain national identity without belonging to a recognized nation-state is a recurring theme not only in general histories of Europe, but also a significant trend in Russian history. While an "exile tradition"¹ existed in Russia in earlier centuries, the emigration after the 1917 October Revolution was noteworthy as much for the scope of its creative output and goals for a future Russia as for the size of its population—the new "country" Marc Raeff calls "Russia Abroad," from a self-conception used by Berlin émigrés in 1926. Historical estimates for the size of émigré populations number as many as 2 million people, from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. While Russian émigrés could be found all over the world, certain European and Asian centers had particularly large concentrations at various times, particularly Paris, Berlin, Belgrade, Prague, and Kharbin in China. Émigrés frequently formed cultural and scholarly associations, such as unions of writers, lawyers, and engineers. Many active émigrés also published journals, such as *Poslednie Novosti* [The Latest News] and *Sovremenniy Zapiski* [Contemporary Annals]. Historians have traditionally conceptualized Russian exiles in terms of generations or 'waves'. The first 'wave' is considered the group of émigrés who were most active before 1940, and subsequent waves are often not considered 'a society in exile,' to the same degree.² My analysis of émigré identity and culture focuses on the first wave emigration in order to examine the self-conception and cultural output of that society.

¹ Robert H. Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon: Paris and the Russian Exiles, 1920-1945* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 7.

² Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-39* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1-26, 30, 82-83, 86. See also Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savicky, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-38* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), iv-xix; Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon*, 3-21.

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Historians Speak

Like their historical subjects, professional historians also craft narratives about the meaning of Russian exile life in order to establish the relevance of the emigration to historical studies. Multiple works acknowledge the historical role of "alien elements" mixing in non-native societies, and the particular recurrence of exile in the twentieth century in a "modern" milieu. In his study of the Paris emigration, Robert Johnston asserted that "refugees are an overwhelming reality of our age," and went on to declare that his monograph had relevance to the "refugee record," as well as the field of Russian studies generally.³ These efforts to discuss historical precedent in conjunction with the modern can be read as an effort to give the émigrés relevance. The potential for integration with refugee history as well as with the concept of modernity creates a broader appeal of its own—while refugee problems are ongoing, in the intellectual and logistical sense, the lessons of the Russian experience remain as examples.

Scholars also discuss the issues of historical interpretation which faced the emigration—particularly the challenge of self-definition presented by the October Revolution and subsequent Bolshevik regime. Understanding of the Revolution was usually sought through memoirs or the popular fiction of Mark Aldanov. Aldanov was particularly popular for his decision to place the Revolution in a broader European context, and his description of historical events as "chance and flux," rather than a predictable or scientific process. This preference is also sometimes attributed to a collective "nostalgia" among émigrés, and the common sentiment that the emotional nature of their recent history made more dispassionate treatments "lifeless and dehumanized." Additionally, the positivist historiographic practice among Russians at the time read most events as indicators of

³ For discussion of the 20th century and exile, see Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 187-198; Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon*, vii.

improvement, which made accounting for October particularly difficult. The emigration was also slow to study itself in this way, in part because the impulse that they would "go home again," and not need to chronicle exile was a long-held belief.⁴ The preference for memoirs over scholarly accounts suggests a turn toward memory as a coping mechanism—emotional and personal readings of October were valued over clear and rational explanations. These issues also reinforce the nature of October as a significant event even for the emigration—the shared experience of Revolution was a meaningful narrative for the emigration as well as the Soviet state, although the readings of the events remained opposed. The added reluctance to dispassionately analyze the experiences of separation from Russia raises another identity problem. Initially, the Russian émigrés defined themselves through the certainty of return to Russia, and admitting that exile was lasting enough to analyze it would have challenged this assertion. It might also have challenged the corresponding notion of October as an aberration in the history of Russia.

Historians Before and After 1991

Besides these broader appeals, the historiography of the emigration also reveals the influence of contemporary political views vis-à-vis the USSR and its culture. In works written prior to 1991, speculation about the role of the emigration and the impact of its history on a non-Communist Russia was a recurring element, as well as recognition of the current diaspora issues. Raeff argues that Russia Abroad "fulfilled its mission" of cultural preservation, and could now play an important role in the Soviet Union in transmitting Western values, as well as following a long tradition in Russia of intellectual dissent from government policy. He ultimately argues that historical precedent supports the possibility for

⁴ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 160-61, 163, 166. On the emigration's reluctance to write its own history, see Marc Raeff, "Recent Perspectives On the History of the Russian Emigration 1920-40," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 2 (2005): 319-334.

the two cultures to finally become integrated, given the Polish and French diaspora's role in cultural production for their nations. Writing in 1988, Johnston concluded that the modern emigration, at that time still largely in the United States, faced similar challenges of maintaining its identity. He concluded that as a response to the policies of the USSR, the "Russian spirit...has sought shelter abroad," because not even Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* had given it sufficient freedom.⁵ Both Raeff and Johnston defend the worth of the emigration in terms of its mission and accomplishments. Raeff's assertions that the emigration's history could provide information and cultural exchange to Soviet Russia suggests that Soviet Russia was lacking cultural standards—a sentiment shared in Johnston's assertion that the USSR was no longer home to the "Russian spirit." These observations imply a normative critique of the Soviet Union's attitudes toward cultural output, since it fell short of the standard set by the emigration. Additionally, Raeff's assertion that Russia Abroad would have an impact on its geographical counterpart similar to other diasporas is essentially a claim that history is on the side of integration, and that cultural exile would not be permanent. While observations like these are no longer relevant as speculation into Russia's future, given that scholarship on the emigration has been in progress in post-Soviet Russia for some time,⁶ analysis of these texts does provide a window into the self-appointed "historical mission" of Western scholars, and the political and cultural issues confronting their work.

Since the fall of the USSR, the historiography of the Russian emigration has undergone some rethinking. Leonid Livak argues that the term *émigré* is more of a

⁵ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 195-98; Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon*, 190.

⁶ For work on the emigration in Russia since 1991, see Greta N. Slobin, "The Homecoming of the 'First Wave' Diaspora and Its Cultural Legacy," *Slavic Review* 60, no. 3 (2001): 513-529; V.M. Selunskaja, "The Integration of the Russian Emigres Between the Two World Wars in Russian and Soviet Historiography," *Russian Studies in History* 41, no. 1 (2002): 8-37.

discursive term than a description of reality, since definitions like Raeff's which assume that émigré identity rests on "repudiating Bolshevism" ignore the political diversity of the emigration and that Russian and Soviet identities became more exclusive in the 1930s, rather than immediately after the formation of exile communities. This suggests some interest in the structuralist view that language is fundamental to our construction of reality, and support for the poststructuralist attack on the conception that it is possible to describe a group according to an "essential" characteristic or assumption.⁷ Thus, Livak's argument that defining an émigré is a largely suspect undertaking for much of history is another way of stating that no "essential" émigré characteristic can be found prior to 1930, and that the supposedly critical trait of opposition to the Soviet regime was in fact a response to later politics rather than a constant of émigré identity. In his analysis of literary values, Livak argues that Soviet and émigré literatures were "opposed literary subsystems...locked in the aesthetics of opposition, since culture needs opposition to nonculture as its privileged member."⁸ While earlier accounts of émigré activity reflect a similar dichotomy and judgment of Soviet output, Livak focuses almost exclusively on issues of language and definition, rather than the actions or declarations of individuals. The introduction of poststructuralist concepts not only challenges established ideas and older accounts, it also increases the focus on the construction of identities in the emigration.

The Problem of October

Some first wave émigrés conceptualized their exile as a quest for preservation of a particular Russian national identity that needed to be safeguarded from efforts to construct a

⁷ Leonid Livak, *How It was Done in Paris: Russian Émigré Literature and French Literary Modernism* (London and Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 8-9. References to post-structuralism's impact on historical writing refer to Kevin Passmore, "Poststructuralism and History," in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger et al., (New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 131.

⁸ Livak, *How it was Done*, 29.

new kind of Soviet identity. As recent scholarship has pointed out, the Bolshevik Party came to portray the October Revolution as its “foundation narrative,” and treated it as evidence to support its view of Russia and the value of its revolutionary project. In contrast some émigrés maintained allegiance to their sense of the “counternarrative,”⁹ which rejected the importance of October and in fact considered it illegitimate, using this view to reject the entire Soviet state. These legitimacy-based arguments have been central to historical debates in both celebrations and critiques of Soviet power. Exile efforts to reject Soviet Russia and maintain allegiance to a ‘genuine’ Russia were considered particularly critical given that émigrés strongly believed in the potential for their return. Rather than become “regular immigrants” and lose ties to Russia, they sought to live a “distinctly Russian life.”¹⁰

Other intellectuals struggled to define Russia's national identity after the events of 1917, and many of these efforts complicated the émigré relationship to the October Revolution, suggesting that reinterpretation of October could serve as a basis for émigré identity as much as rejection of it. Concern about Europe's influence on Russian thought was a popular intellectual trend after World War I, the Russian revolutions, and exile. The philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev responded to this new ambivalence with a new mission for Russia as the “savior” of the world, given its special consciousness of an Eastern identity. For Berdiaev, the Revolution was a sign that Russia had entered into influence in the world. This sense of special mission for Russia invites comparisons to Polish romantic messianism. Similarly, the Eurasianist movement argued that a true sense of Russia's history relied on understanding Russia's Eastern influences as well as its Western ones, retaining the sense of

⁹ Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1, 3-6, 24.

¹⁰ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 5.

October as inevitable given its positivist strains.¹¹ Here, the problem of self-definition was applied to issues of nationhood just as it was in the context of cultural production and history. Berdiaev and the Eurasians maintained a sense of national exceptionalism for Russia in the same way the Russian emigration argued for its particularity—through establishment of a historical role. While these narratives of the Russian past do to some degree accept the Revolution, salvation for the world is in national terms, not those of a Marxist class struggle.

Russian exile life and its creative output was often set up as distinct from its Soviet counterpart, since some émigrés essentially claimed, "You may have Moscow, but we have Russian culture."¹² This kind of statement reinforced the nature of émigré life as a defense of a particular interpretation of events, the creation of an "émigré cultural mythology."¹³ Those in the emigration argued that any effort to adapt in a more conventional manner would interfere with the more significant national mission. Moreover, for émigré communities the national here was also cultural, consciously taking to themselves the mantle of Russian culture. With such arguments, they also implied that the genuine meaning of the nation did not reside within geographical territories, but in values—a sensible argument for an exile community.

Historical Comparison

Émigré self-analysis also included attention to its particular views of Russia, and defense of the uniqueness of Russian exiles both historically and in comparison to other European diasporas. These goals are apparent in case studies of the Prague emigration. Both the Czech government and the exiles there believed that the émigrés would be able to return

¹¹ Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Émigrés in Germany 1881-1941* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), 242-45, 248, 251. For a classic example of Romantic Messianism, see Andrzej Walicki, *Russia, Poland and Universal Regeneration* (Notre Dame/London: University of Notre Dame Press), 1991, 138, 147.

¹² Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 4-5; Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon*, 29.

¹³ Leonid Livak, *How It was Done*, 8.

to Russia eventually, and so they set up in Prague educational organizations with the goal of providing academic training to the younger generations who would some day return.¹⁴ The cultural and institutional efforts abroad on behalf of Russia reflected the argument that the post-October regime had been an aberration, and that national legitimacy therefore resided in the emigration. This émigré sense of uniqueness derived in part from the sense that opposition was part of a moral battle with Bolshevism. They believed that their consistent refusal to assimilate into their host countries linked them with the post-1789 French émigrés. The shorter span of exile of the French émigrés rendered them more attractive to the Russian exiles than, for example, Polish exiles who had known far longer periods of forced isolation from their homeland. Other émigrés justified their claims to a specialized historical position due to the size and diverse nature of those forced to flee, since their emigration actually represented a broad cross-section of Russian society.¹⁵ The arguments for a distinct émigré identity here had both empirical and spiritual dimensions—since Bolshevism was the force of evil, the émigrés defined themselves as its opposite, reaffirming their role as defenders of the nation.

Documenting Exile

The émigrés in Prague confronted an unexpected political problem in the course of the 1920s, a realization that they would not be able to return to Bolshevik Russia. Prominent émigrés like Sergei Varshavsky formed the Committee of the Russian Book, so that the emigration's "spiritual riches" and contributions to Prague's cultural life could become visible, particularly given the increasing clarity that the emigration would be more permanent than initially anticipated and have "cultural achievements of its own."¹⁶ This

¹⁴ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 4-5; Andreyev and Savicky, ix, xxii, 73, 80.

¹⁵ Andreyev and Savicky, 68, 190. See also Johnston, *New Mecca New Babylon*, 10.

¹⁶ Andreyev and Savicky, 105-107, 115.

adaptation to changing circumstances is discussed in the Soviet case also, emphasizing that "the counter-argument [against the Bolshevik interpretation of October] was defined in essential aspects by the component parts of the Bolshevik argument for October as a revolution." The creation of Istpart, in the sense of a move toward the "institutionalization of memory" took place as the Bolshevik party felt the increasing need to create a history for itself. This was an important priority, particularly given that exiles like Kadet politician Pavel Miliukov were publishing "counterhistories" of the Revolution they claimed as their own, as well as the perceived threat of the arguments posed by exiled Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.¹⁷ These examples suggest that while the Bolsheviks and exiles were geographically separate, their ideological stances and behaviors were intimately connected. The pressures Prague émigrés felt to defend their work can be read as a kind of response to the Bolshevik consolidation of power—another dimension of the intertwined relationship between October as argument and the émigré community as counterargument. The creation of Istpart complicates the original assertion that the argument dictates the counterargument—the regime partly acted in awareness of Kadet and Menshevik potential to undercut their foundation narrative, suggesting that the struggle for interpretation continued to be a critical aspect of "Russia Abroad's" relationship to Soviet Russia.

Literature and Letters

Commitment to telling a particular story about what it meant to be Russian was a critical part of self-definition as an émigré, though little consensus existed among the émigrés as to where identity should come from. In support of his contention that the best output of the emigration was "predominantly, if not exclusively, verbal," Raeff discusses the cultural values of Russia's Silver Age and their continuance in exile, specifically the

¹⁷ Corney, *Telling October*, 105-108.

dedication to creativity and a special commitment to the acknowledged contributions of poetic movements such as acmeism. This commitment to continuing some traditions, however, coexisted with ambivalence about other aspects of the national past. Even the reiteration of Silver Age values were accompanied by concerns that the "apocalyptic trend" of the period's poetry had elements in common with the unacceptable October Revolution. Additionally, Tolstoy's advocacy of anarchy was a concern to them. Others held contentious debates on Dostoevsky and the notion that his psychological writing could be seen to reinforce stereotypical notions about Russians as inscrutable or beyond comprehension. While some groups applauded his emphasis on orthodoxy, others dismissed his style altogether.¹⁸ While the émigré dedication to non-Soviet sources of Russian culture is acknowledged as a key element in cultural production and its accompanying identity creation, the debates and issues acknowledged here suggest that this process was far from uniform. In every discussion of literary figures and movements embraced by some segments of the émigré communities there were explicit references to detractors and dissenters. Consensus on an émigré literature writ large seemed illusory.

Another aspect of the cultural issues facing the Russian emigration involved the search for a shared source of inspiration and allegiance. This search raised questions about the sources of cultural identity and useable collective memories. Russian language and literature were often sought as common values. Rejection of Bolshevik orthographic reforms among some émigrés was cast in ideological terms given the particular attachment to a 'pure' Russian language, 'untainted' by Soviet influence. Younger generations were more prone to use the new orthography, and its use was standard after World War II.¹⁹

¹⁸ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 97-98, 101-103.

¹⁹ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 109-110.

These debates over orthography suggest that the nature of language itself remained critical to the émigré claims of superiority over Bolshevism. Further, the retention of the old orthography suggests allegiance to a particular memory of Russian intellectual life, along with the refusal to change. The assertion that this practice did not last beyond World War II suggests that a memory resting on the older Russian language's superiority could not have lasting resonance---supporting Corney's paraphrase of Maurice Halbwachs which contends that in collective memory projects, "only the events of the greatest concern to the greatest number end up articulated."²⁰ Thus, once the number of émigrés who shared the negative view of the orthographic reforms diminished, their memory of a supposedly older and better language lost its significance.

Remembering Russia

In addition to these emphases on language, émigrés debated the validity of particular memories through their commemorative days. The Day of Russian Culture, which centered on the 1937 centennial of Alexander Pushkin's death, was a particularly important holiday given Pushkin's status both inside and outside of Soviet Russia. These celebrations occurred across émigré centers, and incorporated local elements. In Prague, cultural celebrations also centered around ballet and authors such as Gogol. Estonian celebrations incorporated local elements, perhaps as preservation of their non-Russian identity. Other, more conservative émigrés chose to celebrate St. Vladimir rather than the literary values embodied by Pushkin, because the saint's life represented the religious heritage of Russia, rather than an age where the country was less focused on religious values. The celebrations of Vladimir, however, lacked the general support of the Pushkin celebrations.²¹ Alon

²⁰ Corney, *Telling October*, 100.

²¹ Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 93-94. On the varieties of celebrations across the emigration, see Andreyev and Savicky, 156-58.

Confino's discussion of the reception of particular holidays in the periods of German national consciousness before WWI notes that those celebrations and commemorations with the most inclusive and popular base of support, like the Heimat idea of imagining the nation in local terms, endured in place of more exclusive holidays such as celebration of Sedan Day.²² Raeff's contention that the Vladimir religiously-oriented celebrations were ultimately less popular than the Pushkin centered-holiday, as evidenced by their audience largely in Belgrade suggests a lack of consensus about what kind of Russianness to celebrate. Furthermore, the sense that cultural celebrations were not uniform across the emigration, despite the original goal of cohesion, suggests that the degree of inclusion which made the Heimat idea successful in Germany was never reached in the emigration. The variety of cultural celebrations throughout the émigré centers may be read as a way of imagining Russia abroad in "local" terms. To a more distinct degree than the issue of orthography, these debates over which aspect of Russian identity was worthy of a large-scale celebration emphasize the difficulty of positing a single émigré identity, given the multiplicity of views. But perhaps most importantly, the debates center around differing beliefs about which aspects of the national past ought to be singled out for celebration, and why. Given that the emigration had largely rejected any notion of Russia's present as a form of progress, debates over where Russian identity had come from or should return to took on a new vitality.

Bunin, Berberova, and Nabokov- The Making of the Exile

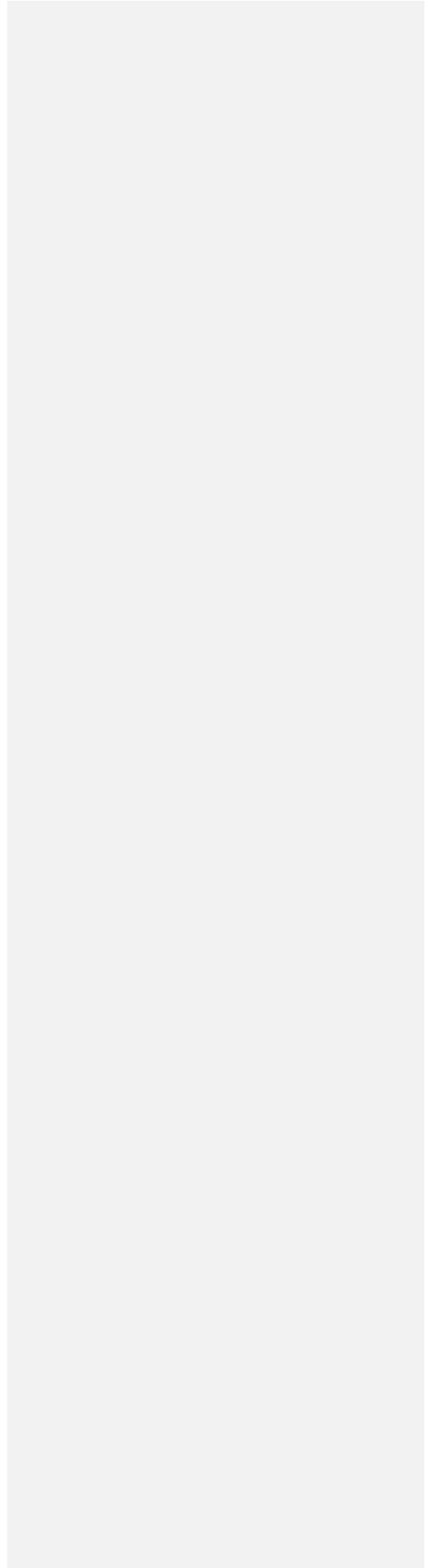
In this study, I have chosen to approach émigré identity through a series of case studies, specifically the memoirs and correspondence of Ivan Bunin, Nina Berberova, and Vladimir Nabokov. All were members of the 'first generation' intelligentsia and wrote extensively on issues of opposition to the Soviet state, and the legitimacy of émigré political

²² Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Wurtemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 186-87.

and literary views. Additionally, all of them left Russia before the end of the Civil War and never experienced the more entrenched Soviet state, though Berberova did return to Russia before her death in 1994. In addition to their common exile status, all three writers revealed the centrality of narrating the cultural and national past to their self-construction and legitimation. These narratives were frequently set up as a counter to Soviet views, but the case of each writer also suggests that defining and defending an émigré ‘project,’ was often as important as denigrating the Soviet counterpart.

Part One of the study, *Looking Outward*, discusses how Bunin, Berberova and Nabokov examined Russian and Soviet events, such as the October and February Revolutions, and the more recent tsarist past. This ‘outward’ gaze at Russia and its history defined their opposition to the Soviet state. It also required looking at exile from a historical and global perspective. Part Two, *Looking Inward*, examines issues of self-definition and the ways in which émigré identity came into conflict with external actors, such as Soviet writers and intellectuals and the Europeans in their host societies. Challenges to émigré identity in response to political debates and events are also considered.

Part One: Looking Outward



The February Revolution and the Bolshevik seizure of power in October were recurring themes in the exile narratives of Bunin, Berberova, and Nabokov. In his Civil War diary, Bunin focused on the apocalyptic, destructive nature of the events, and later, in his speeches for émigrés audience, attacked Lenin's importance. Berberova and Nabokov focused on the lost potential of February, undercutting October's significance. For all three, the Bolshevik power October represented was a destructive force responsible for national decline, and fundamental to each writer's distaste for the Soviet project.

Bunin's commentaries in his Civil War diary, *The Cursed Days*, revealed his determination to deny the power and importance of the October Revolution. Bunin frequently mocked the Bolshevik mythmaking in progress. He asked why there were fears of a tsarist restoration if October was meant to be permanent. Bunin also mocked Red funerals as "base" and claimed that the demonstrations lacked genuine feeling and failed to move audiences. Bunin claimed that people feared the restoration of monarchy even after the Revolution, a fear that stressed the new regime's precarious position, rather than its permanence. His dismissal of Red Funerals suggested that they did not interest those they were intended to move, and that the Bolsheviks failed to craft something emotionally powerful with their narratives. He also argued most people in Odessa did not support Bolshevism, and declared that half the population would have welcomed Satan if he had come to slaughter all of the Bolsheviks.²³ Bunin's portrayal of the devil as deliverer emphasized the apocalyptic nature of this period—traditional sources of salvation had been

²³ Ivan Bunin, *Cursed Days: A Diary of Revolution*, trans. and ed. Thomas Gaiton Marullo (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 86-88, 94-95. Bunin's reference to the devil as liberator directly parallels the plot of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. Thus, Bunin's wish was fulfilled, if only in fiction.

replaced. Additionally, he implied that the Bolsheviks represented a greater evil than the devil.

Nina Berberova's attacks on October revealed not only her personal attitudes toward politics, but also her conception of Russia's place in the world. She dismissed the argument that the October Revolution was unavoidable—"nothing is inescapable except death." She drew upon historical examples of successful Swedish parliamentary compromise to support her claim that "only underdeveloped countries have revolutions, while developed countries change *differently*." Berberova's denial of October's inevitability established her skepticism toward the Bolshevik argument. Her views on which types of countries were prone to revolutions suggested a belief that October only demonstrated Russian backwardness rather than a praiseworthy communist progress. She wrote that "instead of a "palace revolution" Russia "needed a calm and total rejection of any palaces, monuments and fountains, so drawing the line between myth and reality." Her use of Swedish examples conveyed how politics ought to work—a standard which Russia had failed to meet. Finally, the catalogue of things which Russia ought to avoid extended to both monarchy and the Soviet regime. The allusions to palaces and monuments evoked both the Winter Palace and tsarist statues, but also potentially applied to Socialist building projects, the 'new' palaces. This parallel was potentially extended with the importance Berberova attached to distinctions between myth and reality—Nicholas II is portrayed as self-deluded due to his false view of monarchy, and the Bolshevik party engaged in similar "mythmaking."²⁴ Berberova's proscriptions invoked both Russia's past and its present, suggesting that she also rejected any image of October as an innovation.

²⁴ Nina Berberova, *The Italics are Mine*, trans. Phillippe Radley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 81.

Bunin and 'the People'

Bunin's depictions of crowd scenes from his diary emphasize his sense of superiority vis-à-vis his class inferiors and his opposition to social change. Bunin noted unrest and dissension on the street, as his fellow citizens argued with one another over contemporary politics. He emphasized the rude brashness of a worker in contrast to the cool and calm civility of his tsarist ensign opponent. He also recorded in his conversations when he was addressed as *barin*. These contrasts suggest that Bunin primarily assigned positive qualities to those who supported his arguments and were more like him. Bunin accorded the tsarist ensign a monopoly on rationality and civility, while the worker could only resort to rudeness and threats. His descriptions of workers' demonstrations emphasized the Chuvash and Mordvinian faces of the women. As he scanned others in the crowd, Bunin claimed that "some seem to have come straight from Sakhalin."²⁵ The identification of workers with Sakhalin's history as a penal colony suggests that they are a threat to social stability. His description of the female workers as ethnic minorities identified that they were an alien element, where a *barin* like Bunin was the true native. Bunin also complained that his doorman was "spiteful and reluctant" as he let him into the building, and that "everyone has the most cruel revulsion to any kind of work."²⁶ The observation that the people were shirking honest labor was particularly ironic given that Bunin's chosen profession and class position meant that he also never labored. His critique on these grounds suggests that he expected servility and respect from those who served him, and that these standards were declining as a result of the Revolution.

Dismissing Lenin

²⁵ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 31-32, 58-59, 66.

²⁶ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 68.

In his efforts to vilify the Bolshevik seizure of power, Bunin established Lenin as the central “villain” of the revolution and its destructive nature. In a lecture on the “Mission of the Russian Emigration,” in Paris in February 1924, Bunin described Lenin’s “mocking appeal to liberty, equality, and fraternity” as well as his smashing of the ten commandments in favor of his own laws. Bunin declared that Lenin was a “moral idiot from birth,” and praise for him was a sign that “the world has gone crazy.” He also claimed that the main task facing the Russian émigré was to reject all that Lenin stood for, since God had turned against the Bolsheviks. The historical allusion to the language of the French Revolution, combined with Bunin’s insistence that Lenin was “mocking” this tradition, indicated that Bunin made yet another attempt to deny the Bolsheviks their desired pedigree, since they dishonored the traditions they claimed to represent. The attacks on Lenin’s character indicated that Bunin actively resisted any efforts to mythologize Lenin and cast him as a hero after his death, particularly given that this speech occurred soon after. He indicated toward the end of the speech that he could only show reverence to a grave commemorating White valor since “there is the grave of Christ’s Russia,” where he would bow when God’s angel took the stone away. The image of a grave for “Christ’s Russia” indicated that there was only one death that mattered to Bunin--not Lenin’s, but that of the Russia lost to the Bolsheviks. Bunin declared that the mission of the emigration is to wait for deliverance from “The Tatar hordes of today,” as the fifteenth century Russians did.²⁷ The return to Christian metaphors implied that the death would not last, since the émigrés only needed to wait for the Bolshevik overthrow as their ancestors waited for deliverance from the Tatars. This created a particular sense of the Bolshevik regime as unique. Not only was the Bolshevik regime morally bankrupt and a betrayer of Bunin’s idealized heritage, but it would also fail in its

²⁷ Ivan Bunin, *From the Other Shore: 1920-1933, A portrait from letters, diaries, and fiction* ed. Thomas Gaiton Marullo (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 126-28.

mission of permanence. Rejection of October would prove to be the right course, since the émigrés need only wait to be proven right.

His discussion of Soviet artistic politics with his undergraduate friends evoked not only Nabokov's displeasure with Western intellectuals, but also his critique of the Soviet project. Nabokov was particularly scornful of a classmate who considered Lenin a sensitive patron of the arts—Nabokov called him an “ordinary Russian bourgeois,” and remarked that they failed to realize that the more radical a Russian politician was, the more conservative his attitudes in cultural policy. Nabokov labeled Lenin “ordinary,” and thus sought to strip him of mystique. Further, he was “bourgeois,” a use of Marxist language to insult rather than celebrate Lenin's attitudes and accomplishments. He criticized the Soviet attitude toward art as a narrative of limited progress rather than endless potential. Nabokov was similarly dismissive toward Gorky, calling him a “regional mediocrity.”²⁸ Nabokov's choice to label him a “regional mediocrity” seemed to strip him of all potential claims to have a wide-ranging “national” influence, both for lack of talent and a lack of audience interest. Thus, attacking established icons was an important part of the arguments against October found in these memoirs.

Debating Tsarism

In contrast to Bunin's consistent focus on the Bolshevik narrative, Nina Berberova's retrospective accounts of Russia's decline traced the causes and responsibility for these events not only to Bolshevik authoritarianism, but also to the irresponsible behaviors and beliefs of Nicholas II. Indeed, she blamed tsarist incompetence as much as Bolshevik ideology. Berberova called Nicholas II the “principal culprit,” for the undesirable results of Russia's revolution, revealing her complete lack of reverence for royal authority. She also

²⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. (New York/London/Ontario: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 205.

ridiculed his belief that he ruled by divine right since he had not actually become the “Lord’s anointed” when he was invested with royal authority at his coronation, implying that Nicholas’s very self-definition was profane rather than sacred. Any notion that Nicholas was worthy of the distinction of martyr was, she argued, absurd, since “the idea that you can pay for life with death is a ridiculous notion.”²⁹ With this she both took his death out of the realm of sacrifice and self-denial and rendered it ordinary, and in turn dismissed as irrational those who believed this. Not only was he unworthy of martyrdom, he in fact had much to atone for, as her emphasis on “paying for life” showed. By contrast, Bunin reserved his angriest language for the Bolshevik “sons of bitches who live in the Kremlin now.”³⁰ This difference may suggest that generation gaps and age differences contributed to particular portrayals of the Revolution. Berberova’s account indicated that she was more concerned with identifying a root cause for Russia’s failures that rested partially in the past. This suggests a departure from Bunin’s critique, since his diary entries focused primarily on the new regime, a proximate cause rather than one rooted in the past.

Disappointments of February

Berberova’s descriptions of the February and October Revolutions revealed a continued preoccupation with tsarist incompetence. Though these accounts rested on condemnation of individual failures, Berberova’s personal revolutionary narrative also indicated her personal and political attitudes as well as her conception of Russia’s identity and place in the world. She looked back on February 1917 as “new and joyous, because here was the destruction of everything that not only stirred up hate and scorn, but shame as well...shame at the baseness of the old regime...Rasputin, Beilis, the tsarina, and he himself, for whom there cannot be any forgiveness so long as their remains on earth at least one

²⁹Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 78-82.

³⁰Ivan Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 39.

Russian.”³¹ This image of February, though initially celebratory, was soon overshadowed by a sense of rage and condemnation. Berberova’s joy came from “destruction” rather than hopes for a brighter future. Her litany of blame associated the last Romanovs with incompetence and ignorance—ranging from the anti-Semitic times of the Beilis trial to the false spiritualism of Rasputin. Berberova did not refer to Nicholas II specifically, rendering his name a profanity, or perhaps simply unworthy of mention. Berberova extended her critique of the monarchy to the entire Russian nation—claiming a broad base of support for her resentment. This is particularly interesting given her earlier need to belittle those who considered Nicholas a martyr, which suggests she was aware of those who venerated the last tsar and did not share her views. Thus, personal rage clearly delineated Berberova’s political opinions, but also highlighted her logical inconsistencies.

Nabokov’s discussion of the February Revolution in the context of his father’s biography revealed his belief in Russia’s potential for democracy, and the failure of functional politics that October represented, similar to Berberova’s disappointment. Nabokov discussed his father’s reporting work on the Beilis trial of 1912, in which a Ukrainian Jew was accused of blood libel and eating a Christian child, but ultimately acquitted by a jury. Nabokov also responded to the verdict, declaring that it was a demonstration of the fact that “Justice and public opinion could still prevail occasionally in old Russia. They had only five years to go.”³² These comments on the trial suggested that Nabokov viewed it as a sign of Russia’s potential to use democratic mechanisms and overcome prejudice. His conclusion that moments like these would only last for another five years cast an image of October as a watershed event, the end of the democratic politics his

³¹ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 80.

³² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 135. For historical background on the Beilis trial, see Catherine Evtuhov and Richard Stites, *A History of Russia: Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces Since 1800* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 247.

father cherished—his comment suggested they were Nabokov’s politics, too. The comments on his father’s career during the revolutionary period continued the motif of lost potential. Nabokov claimed that “History seems to have been anxious of depriving him of a full opportunity of revealing his great gifts of statesmanship in a Russian republic of the Western type,” when the Kadets left the Provisional Government.

These descriptions show that Nabokov took much of his conception of Russia’s non-Bolshevik future from his father. He also suggested that history was not accommodating of his father’s values. Further, his claim that his father could have participated in a “Russian Republic,” which he imbued with a “Western” character indicated not only a belief in a counterfactual future free of Bolshevism, but also progress conceived in Western terms rather than a distinctive ‘Russian’ way forward. By the time his father was able to participate in the Constituent Assembly, “the November Revolution had already entered upon its gory course.”³³ Nabokov’s sense of early 1917 and the February period as a lost opportunity is similar to Nina Berberova’s. Nabokov also highlighted his father’s choice of “voluntary” exile, and that he was assassinated in Berlin in 1922 by a “sinister ruffian” who later served as Hitler’s minister for émigré affairs. Later passages emphasize that Nabokov senior died protecting the Kadet leader Pavel Miliukov.³⁴ That Nabokov termed his father’s exile “voluntary” created an image of Vladimir Dmitrievich as a free agent, responding to events of his own accord rather than in response to external pressure. His reference to a Nazi murderer of his father suggested another case of lost opportunity, the quintessential democrat’s life foreshortened by the extreme fascist whose political life was in contrast prolonged.

Symbols of Failure- Kerensky

³³ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 135-6.

³⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 136.

Berberova's discussion of her encounters with Alexander Kerensky continued her preoccupation with the disappointments of the February Revolution through a focus on his poor decisionmaking. She noted that her investigations into the 'riddle' of why the Provisional Government did not withdraw from World War I sooner revealed a Masonic conspiracy. Kerensky and his ministers were likely bound by an oath to remain in the war, since the French foreign minister was also a member. Berberova claimed that this decision "indirectly helped Lenin come to power," and observed that some former Kadet politicians like Vasily Maklakov felt a great sense of responsibility for this when she asked them about the problem. Berberova's descriptions of herself and her historical investigations suggests that she remained preoccupied with the lost opportunities of the February Revolution. That the evidence she cited was based on personal contacts emphasizes that her stake in the results of her investigation was far from objective. Indeed, her assessment that the alleged Masonic conspiracy helped Lenin come to power suggests that Berberova was seeking a scapegoat rather than an explanation. She also noted that the Masonic oath prevented Kerensky from revealing that Lenin had received German money, and that this took precedence over his responsibility to the government. Unlike Maklakov and others she pressed for information, Kerensky was silent when Berberova asked him about this possibility, and instead began to sing from *Aida*.³⁵ Her emphasis on Maklakov's sense of personal responsibility contrasts particularly with Kerensky's pretended ignorance. Her description of him singing opera cast him as a foolish figure, perhaps even as the antithesis of a cultured individual since he used music in order to be rude. He was not interested in the truth, and perhaps not interested in claiming his share of responsibility. Her claim that his

³⁵ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 306-307, 310.

Masonic allegiance superceded his national responsibilities in 1917 portrays Kerensky as perpetually irresponsible and lacking in priorities.

Berberova later described Kerensky in terms of his “great self-assurance but limited intellect.” She also claimed that he had lost historical relevance, citing a little girl who asked whether Kerensky was “before or after the emancipation of the serfs.” These descriptions emphasize that, like the tsar, Kerensky deserved no praise for his accomplishments, and was deluded about his own capabilities. Berberova’s description of the little girl’s question may have revealed her view of Kerensky’s ultimate fate- the future would deny him significance. She portrayed him as a pathetic figure, his acquaintances avoiding social situations where they knew he would be present, while Kerensky himself pretended to have a full calendar.³⁶. This self-delusion continued into the present, as he refused to admit his relative friendlessness. Berberova’s choice to discuss Kerensky in her autobiography and her efforts to understand his behavior suggest that she did consider him worthy of some notice, if only as an illustration of incompetence and its consequences for Russia.

Nabokov Laughs

Though Nabokov’s discussion of Alexander Kerensky was not as overtly critical as Berberova’s, his tone suggested that he did not differ significantly from Berberova in his opinion. Nabokov reported that the family’s best car had been dismantled after his father left the Provisional Government so that it would not be confiscated. Soon after, Kerensky’s aides apparently asked Nabokov’s father to provide the Prime Minister with transport if he needed to escape from the Bolsheviks, but then they had no car to give him. Nabokov claimed to find the incident “amusing only from a compositional viewpoint,” since it brought to mind a distant ancestor of his, Christina von Korff, who helped the French Royal

³⁶ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 301-2.

Family escape in 1789 by loaning them a carriage. The allusion to his family's personal past seemed to be more than Nabokov pointing out a surface similarity. Nabokov implied that Kerensky did not leave Russia with his family's help. He did not describe Kerensky's predicament as tragic or unfortunate, and there is no sense of regret at the fate of the family car. He also noted that his "eminent friend" had recently denied that this request was ever made, and claimed that his version of events was the accurate one.³⁷ The label "eminent friend" was sardonic in its delivery, adding to the sense of mockery in Nabokov's tone. Further, the claim that Kerensky denied the incident introduced an element of controversy into Nabokov's account. He disputed not only the Soviet version of his family's past, but also Kerensky's. His comments also cast him as the one interested in the truth, where Kerensky was more interested in concealing it. These paragraphs suggest that Kerensky's 'lost opportunity' was not a source of regret for Nabokov, unlike his father's inability to participate in a democratic Russia.

History as Critique

While Berberova and Nabokov devoted significant attention to pre-Revolutionary Russia's lost potential compared to the moral depravity of the Bolshevik regime, Bunin's historical comparisons looked to the medieval past and the French Revolution. Bunin argued that those who claimed similarity between October and the French Revolution were correct because both events were lead by "shortsighted and flighty dreamers," and "the folk grew increasingly savage and insane," yet the Russian Revolution is "a thousand times more bestial, filthy and stupid." Here, Bun compared the French and Russian Revolutions to disparage Bolshevik leaders. Rather than visionaries with a long-term transformative project, they were 'shortsighted and flighty,' adding to Bunin's view that Bolshevik rule would not

³⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 39, 141

last. Further, his claim that October has surpassed its French predecessor only in its depravity inverted the Bolshevik view that their revolution was an improvement. Bunin compared Lenin and the October Revolution to Stenka Razin and the Time of Troubles, and argued that these events undercut October's uniqueness, since revolutionary tumult had been accomplished before the Bolsheviks. Bunin instead claimed that there was a precedent for the tumult and chaos of revolution in Russia's history, rather than that October is without parallel or equal, suggesting that even if he is engaging in some perception of the events as important by taking the time to argue against them, he refuses to be captured entirely in the terms of the Bolshevik argument. Bunin also claimed that Razin's authority was actually more legitimate than Lenin's government. Despite this claim of 'support' he also argued that Razin "hated law and society," and "hacked people to pieces."³⁸ Bunin's declaration that Stenka Razin's rule had greater legitimacy than the Bolshevik regime, even as he catalogued Razin's excesses and terror, was similar to the passages where the devil is cast as redeemer—all former brutalities had been surpassed by the Revolution. In Bunin's view, the revolution in morals and standards was an unprecedented regression, and any alternative, any past horror, became preferable. This interpretation did grant some uniqueness and power to the October Revolution, since Bunin's account of Bolshevism cast the event and its participants as unequalled in their moral collapse.

History Judges

While parts of Bunin's narrative relied on belittling and criticizing those he saw as opponents to his views, his sense of his value and the worth of his memoirs was another key source of his enduring opposition to the Soviet project. Bunin argued that "our partiality will be very, very valuable to the future historian," and mocked the argument that history only

³⁸ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 221, 224-5, 244-46.

belonged to ‘the people’ as the Bolsheviks conceived of them as he asked, “who the hell are we, if not also ‘the people?’” Bunin’s claim that history would find his point of view valuable was particularly interesting given that history was also seen as a legitimizing force by the Bolsheviks. His claim that he also belonged to ‘the people’ is a defiant resistance to the idea that only workers and supporters of the Revolution belonged to the new Russia. Here, Bunin used Marxist language in support of his anti-Soviet views. He rebutted charges that he was a ‘despot’ with his earlier diary entries which depicted his kindness and generosity toward servants and peasants on his estate. In this vein, Bunin noted his forgiving treatment of a servant’s lover who was a Bolshevik, and argued that he could regret this behavior because “we cannot be like them, for once we are, that’s the end of us.”³⁹ Bunin used his personal memories of benevolence as a weapon against his detractors. The diary entries allowed him to defend the self-image he wished to project, and prove his own moral worth. The final anecdote of kindness to a Bolshevik in better times highlighted the importance of moral superiority to Bunin’s counterargument. His capacity for compassion distinguished him from the Bolsheviks, and this self-image is crucial to the power of his opposition—the struggle is personalized, since it depends both on Bunin’s self-perception and his attacks on the moral failures of his opponents.

In the last two decades of his life, Bunin continued his opposition to the Soviet regime through historical comparison. Prominent émigrés, Bunin among them, criticized the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939, emphasizing that the Soviet government did not represent them in this war. The émigré outcry over Finland presented another opportunity to claim distinctiveness from the Soviet regime, and indicates a willingness to assert contemporary betrayal as well as past grievances. Bunin claimed that the German invasion

³⁹ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 41, 46-47, 102.

of Russia was a sign that the Bolsheviks had been judged by God, “the cursed days have returned.” Bunin’s response to the invasion as “cursed days” invoked two distinct historical periods—the allusion to the title of his memoir suggests similar fears for Russia and outrage at its decline. His argument for the war as a divine judgment reminded the reader that as much as Bunin and other émigrés may have been discomfited by the invasion, they still rejected the Soviet government. Further, since the period of Bunin’s earlier memoir was one of some instability for the Soviet regime, the claim that God has judged the Bolsheviks and found them wanting may suggest contemporary vulnerability as well. Bunin also lamented that “the fuhrers and the Trotskys” remained to plague humanity. Bunin used pre-revolutionary names for the cities, since he considered the new ones “farces”—he describes the battle of Tsaritsyn rather than Stalingrad.⁴⁰ Bunin’s refusal to use Soviet city names also emphasized continued defiance—a preference for his personal memories of the country even as he chronicled its current events. Bunin’s explicit linkage between Hitler and Trotsky indicated a similar urge to connect past and present—for Bunin, fascism and communism were equally reprehensible. This claim also gave evil a kind of timelessness—Trotsky was no different from the current tyrant that threatened Russia, despite contemporary distinctions of nationality and ideology.

Celebrating The Past

In contrast to Berberova’s anger at Nicholas II, Nabokov’s memories highlighted the advances of the tsarist regime which were subsequently lost to Bolshevik authoritarianism, choosing an alternative narrative of decline. Nabokov disagreed with his European classmates over the meaning and value of the tsarist past, and struggled to convince his intellectual adversaries that Russia’s history was a blend of autocracy in government

⁴⁰ Ivan Bunin, *The Twilight of Émigré Russia, 1933-1953*, ed. Thomas Gaiton Marullo (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 101, 119, 150, 168, 186.

accompanied by impressive artistic accomplishments. He claimed that while tsarist rule was “inept and ferocious,” intellectuals had more freedom of expression than under Lenin and the judiciary was “fearless and independent.” Nabokov’s account of the pre-revolutionary past countered both the official Soviet narrative of progress and the relative agreement with this view in some Western circles, suggesting a dispute about the national past that went beyond the merits of Revolution. His claim that autocracy coexisted with a free and outspoken intelligentsia created an image of a “dual Russia,” similar to that in the works of Pavel Miliukov, suggesting that part of the country had enormous potential. His claim that tsarist rule was “inept and ferocious” is similar to Berberova’s stinging language in her discussions of Nicholas II, though she did not celebrate much of the intelligentsia’s former accomplishments. Nabokov also contrasted the relative degree of repression in the two regimes. He declared that “banishment to Tomsk or Omsk...was a restful vacation compared to the concentration camps that Lenin introduced.” He also discussed the relative ease of escape from tsarist exile, commenting specifically on the career of Trotsky and his “famous flight,” calling him “Santa Leo, Santa Claws Trotsky, merrily riding back in a Yuletide Sleigh drawn by reindeer. On Rocket, on Stupid, on Butcher and Blitzen!”⁴¹ In Nabokov’s words here, the playful reindeer of Christmas lore become both bestial and naïve, ferrying back to civilization the man who would bring it only chaos and violence. Nabokov’s claim that tsarist exile was more tolerable than Soviet punishment suggests that even the worst of the old regime now has something good in it by comparison. He identified the gulag system explicitly with Lenin, tracing repression and suffering back to the origins of the Soviet state. These comparisons of the various parts of the Russian past emphasize that

⁴¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 206. For references to “Dual Russia” in Miliukov’s thought, see Robert C. Tucker, “The Image of Dual Russia,” in *The Soviet Political Mind, Stalinism and Post Stalin-Change*, Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York: Norton, 1971), 121-42.

Nabokov felt that the tsarist regime was a better ‘foundation’ for the country and its culture than Bolshevik rule, distinguishing him sharply from Berberova’s stinging critiques of this period.

The Generous Past

Nabokov often used memories of his family to structure his views of pre-Revolutionary life. These personal anecdotes often focused on class issues, which allowed him to illustrate that the privileged classes were not morally bankrupt and the past had value. He began a section on peasant relationships on the family estate with the statement that “fatal poverty and fatalistic wealth got fantastically intermingled in the first decade of our century.” Though Nabokov certainly belonged to the wealthy, this group is not privileged in his description. The label of fatalism suggests that they are unwilling to act, to create change. The characterization of poverty as ‘fatal’ suggests that Nabokov was willing to blame income disparities for the tumultuous nature of Russian politics, and perhaps the Revolution. Nabokov’s chief example is his father, the *barin*, being called away from his family to meet peasant demands, which he often did. He noted later that his father’s popularity with the peasants saved his family from unrest in the Revolution of 1905. He clearly viewed his own family as different from the wealthy of Russia of whom he was critical. Nabokov portrayed his father as popular with the peasants and committed to giving them whatever they desired, rather than being strict or demanding—a generosity which helped soften the family experience of political turmoil.

Nabokov continued his discussion of class relationships as he noted that his mother kept her old nurse with the family and let the old woman think she still helped the household, and his father could never bring himself to punish servants who were stealing from the family, despite being “professionally vexed” at his inability to manage his

household. Nabokov emphasized his parents' kindness and willingness to indulge their employees. His anecdotes suggested that they cherished personal relationships over material concerns, since both his father and his mother responded emotionally rather than pragmatically to servant's needs. The claim that his father was "vexed" at the behavior of servants suggests that these occurrences were a minor annoyance rather than a serious offense. Nabokov also noted that a servant who was about to be fired would often claim that a child was sick, and his father would send for the doctor and forget about his initial complaint. Nabokov's narration here suggested amusement at his father's kindness and naiveté, and perhaps sympathy with his motives⁴² The theme continued in Nabokov's discussion of the Civil War, since the family chauffeur journeyed from St. Petersburg to the Crimea to bring the family letters and money. He also helped Nabokov's mother hide the family jewels, even as he stole items like an alarm clock and tennis shoes—items Nabokov claimed his parents would have given the chauffeur "gladly."⁴³ The chauffeur's contradictory behavior suggests that Nabokov's family still inspired some loyalty—particularly interesting in such a class-polarized period of Russian history. Additionally, the claim that Nabokov's parents would have given away their possessions even after their fortunes had changed suggests that their generosity was not contingent on great personal wealth.

Losses to the Bolsheviks

Bunin and Nabokov each turned to their sense of personal loss as a result of Revolution, indicating that the Bolsheviks had not only squandered national resources, but also wrecked their valued traditions. Bunin's depictions of the society and landscape around him emphasized his attention to tradition and its value. These nostalgic moments of appreciation were frequently accompanied by attacks on those groups Bunin considered

⁴² Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 30-31.

⁴³ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 192.

unworthy of national traditions. As he walked around Nikolaevsky Station in Moscow, Bunin noticed the sunlight gleaming off the snow, and the familiar churches and buildings. “Can it be that all this wealth, this beauty is coming to an end?” Here, Bunin’s love of Russia was expressed through his fondness for Moscow as a symbol of national pride and strength. His rhetorical question emphasizes that what he loved was under attack. Bunin’s fondness for the landscape did not extend to its inhabitants—he emphasized that the workers and peasants around him carried weapons, and were “wearing overcoats any old way,” and despaired that “these are now the masters of everything, the heirs of a colossal heritage.”⁴⁴ The theme of disappointment continued with his depictions of the crowd—he focused on weapons, the crowd’s capacity for violence. He also set himself apart from the people, since they were now the ‘masters.’ His despair that these groups were the ‘heirs’ of Russia indicates that Bunin did not consider them capable of appreciating Russia as he did, and that they were somehow unworthy. Bunin’s conclusion to that day’s diary entry returned to the theme of his negative sense of the Revolution’s transformative power, using discussions of the Kremlin and the city to portray contemporary events as a threat to tradition. Bunin detailed the rumors that some Muscovites wanted to blow up the Kremlin in order to save it from the Germans. He also claimed that he had not properly appreciated Moscow’s cathedrals until then. He concluded pessimistically that the rumor about the Kremlin seemed potentially truthful, since “anything is possible now.”⁴⁵ Here, the Kremlin operated as a sign that no element of the old Russia was safe—even the symbol of Russia’s ancient strength and power was under attack. Bunin’s inability to dismiss such rumors emphasized his sense of instability and fears for the future.

Endurance of Memory

⁴⁴ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 51-52.

⁴⁵ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 53.

While Bunin discussed his personal relationships with Moscow and its landmarks, Nabokov turned to issues of personal memory and his family in order to describe his émigré identity and anger at the Bolsheviks. The theme of a lost homeland was clear in Nabokov's description of his first return to Russia after a trip abroad with his family, when he was six. The visions of the family estate in winter were his first "exciting sense of *rodina*, (motherland)." These visceral evocations of Russia emphasized that connection to the nation was a deeply emotional experience—an idea as strong as any concrete reality. Nabokov declared that the experience "seems to me now a rehearsal, not of the grand homecoming that will never take place, but of its constant dream in my long years of exile."⁴⁶ The claim that these memories of return were a "rehearsal," suggests that his past somehow prepared him for separation from Russia, creating a sense of connection between distinct periods of time. This concept of a 'bridge' in time is considered a key part of Nabokov's approach to the past, as well as his views of what constituted "successful" exile experience.⁴⁷ The claim that this childhood experience of *rodina* was his 'constant dream' as an adult emphasizes that Nabokov was similar to other émigrés in his nostalgia and desire for return.

Nabokov's efforts to retell and shape a narrative of his childhood displayed concern with the process of remembering and the discovery of meaning in his past, particularly in the links between his childhood and his eventual fate as an émigré. These acts of remembering could serve as a process of consolation for his losses. Nabokov declared that, "in regard to the power of hoarding up impressions, Russian children of my generation passed through a period of genius, as if destiny were loyally trying to do what it could for them...in view of

⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 71.

⁴⁷ Pichova, *Art of Memory in Exile*. See also Matt Reed, "Homo Lepidopterist: Nabokov and the Pursuit of Memory," *Clio* 29, no. 3 (1999): 271-294.

the cataclysm that was to remove completely the world they had known.”⁴⁸ Here, Nabokov’s personal efforts at recollection were linked to his nationality and experiences. The past is “hoarded,” a word choice implying that something valued had been saved, jealously, as if outside forces were somehow threatening it. The claim that his generation had “genius” emphasizes the exceptional nature of these collective experiences, as does the labeling of Revolutionary events as a “cataclysm.” Additionally, the sense that destiny aided in this exceptional capacity to retain a sense of pre-Revolutionary Russia suggests that memory was a kind of compensation for lost childhood.

At times in his memoir, Nabokov directly discussed his adversarial relationship with the Soviet regime, while other anecdotes established his opposition more indirectly. Clearly, his opposition was personal as much as ideological. Nabokov outlines his opposition for the benefit of the “particular idiot, who, because he lost his fortune in some crash, thinks he understands me. My old (since 1917), quarrel with the Soviet dictatorship is wholly unrelated to any question of property.”⁴⁹ Nabokov’s characterization of materialists who claimed kinship with him as “idiots” separated him from them in intellectual terms, since they were incapable of understanding his real opinions. Further, his claim that his opposition to the Soviets was separate from these material concerns suggested a sense of superiority, as did the labeling of the regime as a dictatorship. Nabokov went on to note that “my contempt for the émigré who ‘hates the Reds’ because they ‘stole’ his money and his land is complete. The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not sorrow for lost banknotes.”⁵⁰ The explicit mention of others who rejected the Soviet regime broadened Nabokov’s attack on materialists, and suggested that Nabokov, rather

⁴⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 14.

⁴⁹ Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, 53.

⁵⁰ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 53.

than seeking émigré unity, preferred not to associate with those who focused narrowly on their possessions. His assertion that it was his lost childhood that he begrudged the Soviet regime emphasizes that his ‘quarrel’ was a result of personal injury rather than a property dispute.

Memory as Consolation

Nabokov’s other references to the Soviet regime were similarly personalized and often critical, if sometimes less direct than his tirade against those who mischaracterized the reasons for his opposition. Nabokov described his grandfather’s choice of a large iron staircase for the family estate because he feared fires, and then informed the reader that the house did burn down after the Revolution, but that the staircase remained and was “all alone, still leading up.”⁵¹ The image of the staircase remaining long after the occupants of the house were dead or exiled was particularly striking. It hinted that something from Nabokov’s family, and the pre-Revolutionary past, managed to survive under Soviet rule. It also emphasized that while Nabokov did not blame the regime for the fire or lament the lost property, his recollections included these losses as well as the emotional ones that he claimed as the basis for his opposition.

In later anecdotes, Nabokov called the Bolsheviks “pedantic” since they shot the family valet for not reporting the bicycles he had stolen so that they could be requisitioned by the state. The details of the valet’s punishment set up an inconsistent and ridiculous vision of justice in the new Russia. They punished the valet for his failure to give them stolen property, rather than the act of theft itself—this suggests that Nabokov viewed the Bolsheviks as greedy and self-interested, as well as worthy of his mockery. He also commented that some of his family’s paintings were now in Soviet museums, but that the

⁵¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 74.

pavilion in the family park, sketched by his grandmother, “will never be nationalized.”⁵² Nabokov clearly felt pleasure in this personal defiance of its property policy. Yet his statement was also ambiguous, since Nabokov may have meant that his memory of the sketch, and pavilion were the truly valuable possessions. This also implied that the definition of ownership is broadened and altered due to the power of memory.

One of Bunin’s speeches on the emigration’s mission focused particularly on Russia’s former greatness and his view of its descent due to the Revolution and its new leadership. Bunin claimed that Russia was once “a home bursting with goods and things...a mighty family in all respects, brought into being by the hallowed labors of many, many generations, and dedicated to honoring God, the memory of the past, and everything that bears the name of...culture.”⁵³ These statements bore little relationship to pre-revolutionary Russia in reality, but they did indicate Bunin’s idealized views and rhetorical purpose. These images revealed prosperity in the material sense, given that Bunin’s metaphorical house was “bursting.” He described the entire country as a “family,” brought together by its work, which evoked unity and collaboration. The reference to God evoked sanctification corresponding with the earlier Christ imagery. His claim that memory is an integral part of culture suggests that Bunin regarded his own nostalgia as an important contribution to the national heritage. It may also indicate that Bunin was dissatisfied with the Bolshevik efforts to craft a public memory, since it is his own specific memories which were ‘national.’

The Power of Exile

Bunin, Berberova, and Nabokov each contended with defending not only their views of the Soviet state, but also their perceptions of exile life and its significance. Nabokov argued that exile and nostalgia shaped his character for the better and shaped his personal

⁵² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 108, 176.

⁵³ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 126.

nationalism. Berberova's discussions of the émigrés and their contributions were no less personalized, although more focused on broader cultural contributions and her hopes for Russia's future. The debates surrounding Bunin's literary career after his death emphasized that exile status was defended and contested, much as émigré and Soviet views of literature and politics were.

Exile's Rewards

Nabokov recalled his mother, Elena, bending down to kiss the earth of the country house each time she returned to it as one of the things he had lost forever. He noted that his particular pain at being parted from Tamara, his first love, may have been influenced by Pushkin's poetry from his own exile. Though he emphasized that the feelings were genuine and the two losses were coupled in his mind. The image of Elena Nabokov kissing the earth brings in a direct connection between the family and the land—this tie was broken, as was Nabokov's direct link to his first love. Nabokov focused on a more visceral literary relationship between himself and Pushkin, similar to Bunin's projection of his feelings onto the poet's statue in *Cursed Days*. Despite his allusions to the "pangs of exile," Nabokov also wondered if living life in the same place with the past easily within reach might have been just as detrimental to his psyche. He ultimately described exile as a "sycophantic kick that I would not have missed for worlds."⁵⁴ But these seem to be Nabokov's accounts of his feelings as a teenager and a youth—the adult Nabokov recognized exile as a gift, a "kick," a stimulant which moved him forward in his personal development. Though he speculated about what a more stable existence could have been like, his conclusions ultimately suggest that this existence had its own pitfalls. This catalogue suggests that Nabokov, by the time he wrote his autobiography, had come to recognize and prefer the benefits of exile.

⁵⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 191-195. For imagining the nation 'locally,' see Confino, *Nation as Local Metaphor*, 188.

Nabokov's musings on a return to Russia emphasized that his personal relationship with the country was separate from actual residence there, and that his conception of homeland was equally idiosyncratic. In this way, Nabokov shows his reader his personal "Russia Abroad." Nabokov declared that certain images of Russia, like the Aral Sea or the Urals, "affect me nostalgically as much or more as say, Utah," although he noted that he felt much more intensely about anything which reminded him of St. Petersburg. Nabokov's nostalgia was particular—only St. Petersburg held emotional power for him, suggesting that he conceived of 'Russia' in personal and local terms. Thus, for Nabokov, the essence of Russia was not its entire geographic reality, but his own experiences of it. He also entertained the possibility of returning to Russia under a false name, but said that he had been "dreaming of it too idly and for far too long," as he had once thought about joining the White Army.⁵⁵ Nabokov explicitly identified this desire for return with his initial youthful dreams, cementing his sense that it should be consigned to fantasy. Further, it indicated that acceptance of exile was part of adulthood—an implication that fits well with Nabokov's more mature conclusion that a transient existence was preferable to a permanent one.

A Generation Triumphs

Towards the end of her memoir, Berberova returned to her central preoccupation of the worth and meaning of her own life, especially her decision to remain in exile. She declared that, "we who were born between 1895 and 1910 grew up on tragedy...but the tragedy has ended and the epic has begun. In March 1953 the epic began, and the epic began in us, too. Enter Fortinbras, he is still entering."⁵⁶ Here, Berberova turned to her generation as a particular source of her émigré identity. Her claim of "tragedy" as the special distinction of her generation reprised the theme of endurance and loss so prominent in earlier sections

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 196.

⁵⁶ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 520.

of her work. More significantly, Berberova identified March 1953 as the end of this birthright—the death of Stalin signified the end of an era for her generation, just as it did for Russians in the USSR. That Berberova chose Hamlet for her literary allusion emphasized some return to stability after upheaval—although Hamlet dies, a new leader takes his place and stability is assured. For Berberova, though, Fortinbras was ‘still entering,’ so that the reader becomes aware that her desired change in leadership had not yet taken place.

Berberova also commented on the worth of exile in more concrete terms. She quoted the French Romantic writer François-Rene du Chateaubriand, emphasizing that it would have made a good epigraph for *Italics*: “The changes in literature of which the nineteenth century boasts came to it from emigration and exile.” Berberova agreed with the quote because of Chateaubriand’s emphasis on “the continuity of the tradition of freedom.” This quote created continuity between Russian exiles after 1917 and French exiles after 1789. Here, Berberova explicitly stated that the value of the Russian emigration’s efforts came from its ability to write more freely than the Soviet literary establishment. Additionally, Berberova claimed a place for the emigration in the perspective of the entire century—granting it a historical worth similar to Ivan Bunin’s claims that historians would one day find his diary and his ‘partiality’ valuable.⁵⁷ She also described the current state of the emigration, that most of its prominent citizens were only visible in the Russian cemetery at St. Genevieve Les Bois. She claims that “by the year 2000, this will make an interesting commentary. It will suddenly turn out that both quality and quantity played their roles.⁵⁸” The claim that history will eventually discover that quality and quantity were important may be read as oblique allusion to the lower numbers of émigrés compared to the population of the USSR—the émigrés in the cemetery may have represented Berberova’s personal definition

⁵⁷ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 41.

⁵⁸ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 521.

of ‘quality.’ Berberova also reiterated the impossibility of a return to Russia, in a dream where she returned to Leningrad and rode the subway, but could not find an exit. She was confident that someday, even after a century, someone could “pull her out,” into the city above.⁵⁹ Berberova’s dream suggests that she did believe in the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. In contrast to the concrete hopes and plans for return of some émigrés, her dream was abstract, a distant vision. These declarations suggest that Berberova had enduring faith in the contributions of the emigration, and that the future for the Russian people would be less bleak than some of her personal memories.

Evaluating Defiance

The various responses to Bunin’s death in October 1953 provided yet another angle on the debates about the emigration, and emphasized continuing efforts to undermine the émigré counterargument and claims to legitimacy and superiority. Western writers like Andrei Gide and Pearl Buck agreed that Bunin had “chosen misery to preserve freedom.”⁶⁰ This view of exile presented it as a hardship and sacrifice, with Bunin as the central martyr figure, not unlike Bunin’s own images of himself later in life. The Union of Soviet Writers claimed that Bunin “lacked the strength to return home,” but argued that this did not mean he deserved to be “excluded from history,” emphasizing the more inclusive turn in literary politics after the death of Stalin. The admission that Bunin deserved inclusion rather than dismissal suggested that something about Bunin’s “partiality” remained worthwhile, just as he claimed in *Cursed Days*. Other responses included claims that Bunin’s exile was “bitter and needless,” and speculation about the glorious return to the USSR he might have enjoyed.⁶¹ These interpretations of exile treated it as a failing and sign of weakness rather than a source

⁵⁹ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 522.

⁶⁰ Bunin, *Twilight of Emigré Russia*, 356.

⁶¹ Bunin, *Twilight of Emigré Russia*, 378-9.

of strength. Exile undermined Bunin's strength and power as an intellectual. The description of exile as "needless," suggested that the entire émigré cause and those who embraced it were objects of pity. The claim that Bunin's return could have been "glorious" contrasted sharply with émigré arguments about life in the USSR. Thus, assessing Bunin's life presented yet another opportunity for the Soviet argument and counterargument to contest each other, with the worth and meaning of exile as a central term of the debate.

Debating the Soviets

While all three memoirs emphasize that Bunin, Berberova and Nabokov each crafted their own narratives of the national past, their accounts also reveal that contestation and competition with Soviet version of events was an ongoing struggle with contemporary relevance. In particular, Maxim Gorky's responses to Bunin's views showcase that problems of individual memory strongly related to the issues of legitimacy central to the arguments between Soviet sympathizers and émigrés. Gorky wrote in 1925 that the manuscript of *Cursed Days* was a "very bad thing," and that it upset him to see Bunin so angry, given his erudition and talents. He concluded that Bunin "has lost the artist within him."⁶² Given that Bunin's diaries of the Civil War were his effort to craft a tale of opposition and defiance of Soviet power, Gorky's dismissal of them might have represented an effort to challenge and discredit the nature of Bunin's memory. The refusal to include *The Cursed Days* among Bunin's past accomplishments suggests that Gorky felt his diary was better forgotten. Gorky also directly challenged Bunin's accounts of their past friendship, with interesting repercussions for the relationship between personal memory and political struggles. He countered Bunin's assertion that the two were not initially friends with evidence that Bunin

⁶² Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 145, 181.

dedicated a work to him early in their relationship, and that they were close until 1916.⁶³

Contesting Bunin's view of their shared past suggests that Gorky used memory to challenge Bunin's honesty—potentially significant since part of Bunin's self-image as an émigré rested on the truth of his memories. Additionally, the assertion that their friendship lasted longer than Bunin stated reminded Gorky's readers that the two men were not always at odds.

Gorky focused on this in a time of bitter opposition where Bunin would likely have preferred to forget or diminish the importance of such a relationship.

Berberova's discussions of Gorky also emphasize divisions within the Russian intelligentsia between Soviet sympathizers and the regime's opponents. She emphasized that meeting Gorky and discussing literature with him reminded her of consistent debates within the intelligentsia. Russian literary figures seldom agreed on definitions of what constituted a well-written work. According to Berberova, this was 'fatal' for Russian culture. For Berberova, Gorky was a symbol of tragedy, proof of something fundamental in Russian identity, and the nature of the intelligentsia's conflicts. She also described Gorky as moved to tears by Bunin's work—though Bunin was Gorky's "sore spot" and he remained curious about him, and was even so moved by one of Bunin's books that he "would not touch Soviet best-sellers or manuscripts sent to him by unknowns."⁶⁴ Yet he also represented something about the split between émigré and Soviet literature—Berberova's emphasis on Bunin's power over Gorky suggests that the émigré argument about what constituted real literature was still reaching those who believed in some aspect of the Bolshevik argument. The specific claim that Gorky dismissed Soviet literature after reading Bunin's latest work

⁶³ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 237.

⁶⁴ Nadya Peterson, "The Private 'P' in the Works of Nina Berberova," *Slavic Review* 60, no. 3 (2001): 493-495. For the sections on Gorky, see Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 171-2, 180-81.

indicated that Soviet standards of art were not enough for some. In this instance, the émigré argument about literature triumphed.

Soviet Interest

The Soviet intelligence service's interest in Bunin and his past suggested that the sense of ongoing struggle with the ideological opposition was a part of Soviet thought as well. Soviet sources often focused on Bunin's status and potential worth—a 1937 report commented that Bunin “would have been our friend,” if his experience of Civil War had been more positive, and if he had remained friends with Gorky. Reports like these emphasize that the emigration was of serious concern to the Soviet government in this period. That Soviet intelligence spent time solely on Bunin's opinions and character suggests that officials recognized his importance as a symbol of defiance. The report also claimed that Bunin's opposition to Soviet Russia was rooted in “self-hypnosis and the result of personal anger and frustration...in no way does it have an ideological basis.” The attempts to cast Bunin as personally vindictive rather than a true believer in the émigré cause, and the effort to label his politics as fascist suggest that damaging émigré legitimacy was an important aspect of intelligence efforts. Though the report falsely claimed that Bunin wrote *The Liberation of Tolstoy* for material gain and that he supported fascism's threats to Soviet power, Bunin was also described as “resourceful, witty, and funny.”⁶⁵ These comparisons created an image of Bunin as an irrational and spiteful individual rather than a crusading intellectual—a person so dedicated to Soviet opposition that he was willing to ignore contemporary evils. The comments relating to Bunin's past with Gorky and his negative experiences of Revolution suggested a sort of official regret. While Bunin was being cast as an enemy, he also represented a lost opportunity to win over an opponent. The descriptions

⁶⁵ Bunin, *Twilight of Émigré Russia*, 74.

of Bunin's positive personal qualities added to the sense of contradiction in this official picture—Bunin's intelligence and capacity for endurance were acknowledged rather than dismissed.

Rewriting the Soviet Past

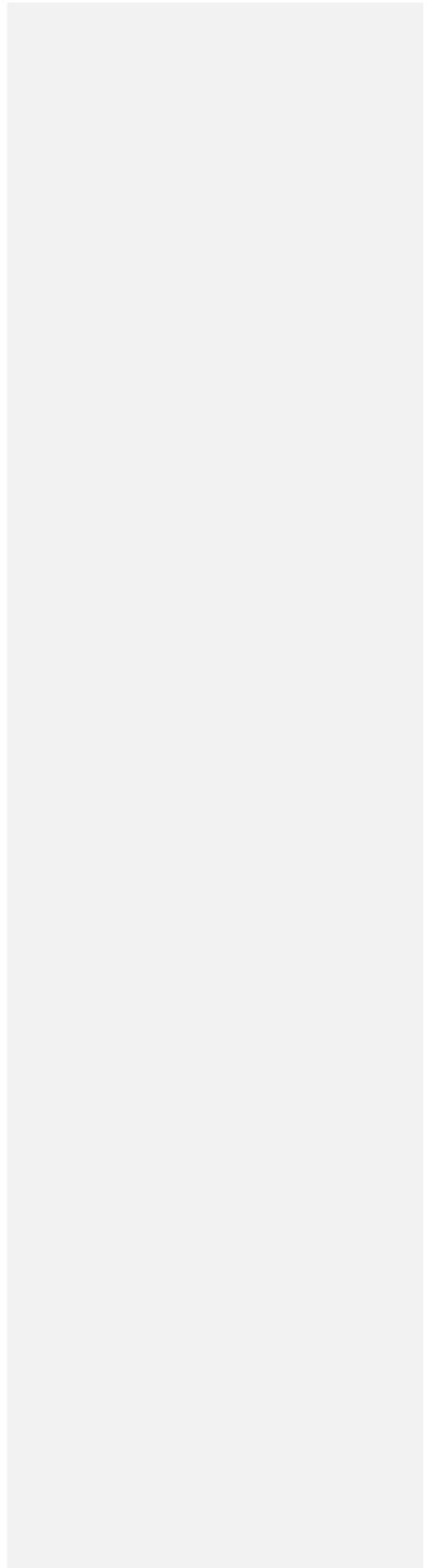
Bunin's responses to Soviet interest in him emphasize that even as he aged and grew more conflicted about his relationship to Russia, Bunin often relied on memory as a reassurance that remaining in exile was the better choice. In a visit with the Soviet writer Konstantin Simonov, Bunin reportedly quizzed him about the whereabouts of known purge victims like Isaac Babel. Simonov remained silent. Bunin's questions showed that the emigration was free to discuss purge victims, while Simonov was forced to say nothing. Bunin also emphasized that he felt secure in his own superiority in the face of personal attacks, since he had given up a potentially lucrative return to Russia by staying in exile. Bunin's insistence on his sacrifices for exile drew on the memory of suffering to anchor his claims to legitimacy—he celebrated his own uniqueness and sacrifices, and saw himself as a hero in a story of continued opposition. When he gave an interview to the magazine *Soviet Patriot*, Bunin later contested the text of the interview, claiming that he would never say the Soviets acted "wisely and nobly," and that the reporter was taking advantage of his financial circumstances and acting dishonestly. This not only revealed concerns about the veracity of the interview, but also a refusal to grant the opposition good qualities and maintain his own moral superiority. In this interpretation, Bunin alone was concerned with the truth and the reporter was more focused on manipulations of events. Bunin also continued to comment on Russian literature—one of his later critiques of the new orthography centered on how repulsive Pushkin's name looked written in it, and that "no one asked Pushkin's

permission.”⁶⁶ Bunin’s invocation of Pushkin suggested that literary values were another source of the past as inspiration for opposition. Since Pushkin was another maligned victim of the new orthography, and his freedoms were taken away by the new regime, Bunin’s complaint had the weight of the celebrated past as well as his own prejudice. Further, it implied that the Bolsheviks were not content with simply constraining the living, but also the honored literary icons of the Russian past.

Nabokov’s account of his father’s career and political views occupies a particular prominence in his memoir, and also suggest that Nabokov also saw ideological opposition to the Soviet regime as a continuous struggle. He wrote at length of his father’s recollections, suggesting their central place in his own sense of personal and national identity and particularly his political attitudes toward pre-Revolutionary politics and the February and October Revolutions. His early commentary emphasizes his father’s opposition to the tsarist regime—Nabokov senior lost his court title, refused to drink to Nicholas II’s health, and dedicated himself to democratic politics in the Kadet party. The predominant image of Nabokov senior is one of defiance in the service of democracy—his father’s speeches as a Duma member were “splendid,” suggesting that Nabokov admired his father’s democratic views along with the audacious gesture of selling his court uniform. Nabokov mocked Soviet biographers who mischaracterized his father’s politics, and Western commentators who were “infected with Soviet propaganda” and thought that the First Duma was identical to the pre-Petrine Dumas. Clearly, Nabokov sought to tell the ‘true’ story of his father’s accomplishments. Like Bunin in his response to the *Soviet Patriot* interview, Nabokov cast aspersions on the Soviet claims to proper representation of the past—he belittled their propaganda efforts against the accomplishments of the First Duma.

⁶⁶ Bunin, *Twilight of Émigré Russia*, 300, 303-305, 330, 332.

Part Two: Looking Inward



Cultural Grievances

In addition to their critiques of the Bolsheviks in moral and political terms, Bunin, Berberova and Nabokov each highlighted the literary and cultural changes in Soviet Russia as a major source of their opposition to the new state. They each defined themselves as writers and intellectuals in ways that the new state did not welcome, and this was central to their critique. One of the central traumatic periods Berberova focused on was the 1921 death of Alexander Blok, one of the poets prominently identified with the Symbolist movement. Her detached and matter-of-fact attitude to the realities of October contrasted sharply with her emotional response to Blok's death.

I was suddenly and sharply orphaned...not only Blok had died but this city [St. Petersburg] was dying with him, its special power over people was coming to an end, a historical period was closing...all that came afterward was only a continuation of this August...the mass exile of the intelligentsia, the beginning of political repressions, the destruction of two generations.⁶⁷

Berberova had been "orphaned" by Blok's death, suggesting that he was not only a source of literary inspiration, but a kind of spiritual and intellectual parent figure. But his death did not impact her alone, since it had the power to reshape the landscape, to dim the power of its beauty. Her claim that history itself was affected by Blok's death suggested that literary events were the ones with the most significance for her. Berberova's declaration that all the disturbing events in Russia began with the close of the era that Blok's death symbolized is also significant. She essentially declared that his death was her personal revolutionary event.

Heroes and Anti-Heroes

⁶⁷ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 123, 126.

Like Berberova, Bunin used his discussion of art and culture not only to portray his sense of loss, but also to illustrate his sense of Bolshevik inadequacies. One night as he walked home, Bunin observed that Pushkin's face was drooping, although it was 'shot through with rays of light,' Pushkin seemed to be saying, "How sad my Russia is!"⁶⁸ Bunin set up Pushkin as a sympathizer with his own views—they have the same sense of Russia due to their shared sorrow at its current circumstances. Further, the metaphorical 'support' of the great literary icon added greater weight to Bunin's own views. Additionally, these claims emphasize the constructed nature of Bunin's legitimizing narrative. Pushkin's Russia was not free from repression of its own given the atmosphere of censorship and repression under Nicholas I. While Bunin's discussions of the past reveal what he found most valuable in Russian literature, his discussions of contemporary writers emphasize his contempt for new literary mores and his sense of his own superiority. Bunin criticized the inability of Russian intellectuals to create genuine social change, identifying the problem with 'Chatskys' after the hero of Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*. Chatsky is often identified as an early Russian example of the 'superfluous man,' the intellectual struggling to give his existence meaning and accomplish something.⁶⁹ Where Pushkin was a symbol of former glory, Chatsky represented the weaknesses of the intelligentsia that were partly responsible for Russia's current situation.

How Not to Write

Bunin also complained about the new orthography instituted by the Bolsheviks as a metric for cultural decline. He claimed that "The human hand has never written anything like what is being written now." The critique of orthography suggests that language itself was

⁶⁸Ivan Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 66.

⁶⁹ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 100; For discussion of the superfluous man, see George Gibian ed., *The Portable Nineteenth Century Russian Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 24-25. For a detailed study of Proletkul't, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkul't Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

fundamental to Bunin's hatred of the new state—writing in the new letters required dispensing with humanity. Bunin expressed his scorn for Proletkul't, the new movement in Soviet Russia to create a 'mass' culture. He likened participation in it to moving adjacent to the offices of the Cheka. Bunin's link between the new cultural organs and the secret police indicates that he equated Proletkul't not only with his own loss of freedom, but also that the movement was simply an extension of existing repression. He claimed that it was particularly galling that the worthlessness of Proletkul't was not apparent, and that he actually had to convince people of its flaws.⁷⁰ He resented that his own values were now part of an argument rather than treated as self-evident. Further, Bunin's sense that he had to refute the Bolshevik perceptions of literature suggests that he responded, in some way, to a sense of being trapped by the new Bolshevik discourse. Bunin also used his critique of Bolshevik cultural policy to emphasize his own conceptions of what the Revolution meant. He declared that it was impossible to teach anyone to use art in the service of the Revolution, "where his colleagues rob, beat, rape, ruin churches, whip with belts taken from the backs of officers, and marry priests to horses!"⁷¹ The images Bunin focused on here were those of violence and turmoil, suggesting that the Revolution has produced nothing beautiful and thus nothing worth memorializing artistically. Additionally, his attention to the fate of churches and the military elite suggests that the breakdown of old social institutions and categories is another aspect of the Revolution's destructive power. In particular, the image of a priest married to a horse was deliberately exaggerated and fantastic, suggesting that the results of the Revolution were unnatural and an abomination unworthy of cultural attention.

Soviet Constraints

⁷⁰ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 123-124.

⁷¹ Bunin, *Cursed Days*, 123-24.

The importance of artistic freedom was also an important theme in Berberova's account of the early 1920s and her fears for the future, suggesting that her self-identification as a writer and member of the intelligentsia was a critical aspect of her increasing criticism of the Soviet project and desire to remain in exile. Her descriptions of the literary politics of the early 1920s were marked by a sense of precariousness and vulnerability. Although she had some faith in Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment, who worked on issues of cultural production, and cited more moderate literary politics to protect writers, she was also aware that he could have decided to "become a hammer rather than a communist aesthete, forging the Russian intelligentsia on the anvil of the Revolution." Her choice of language implied his possible transition from a human being to a blunt instrument. The negative transformations continued, since the Russian intellectuals were rendered into passive and impotent raw material by the Revolution. This was similar to Bunin's contention that participation in Proletkult' and writing in the new orthography would have required him to behave as less than a human being. Berberova looked back on the 1930s and the number of writers she knew who were repressed, and noted that she would have perished in the Great Terror if she had stayed. "Destruction did not come personally to each one who was being destroyed, but as a group, destruction of a whole profession, carefully planned. Poets were destroyed as a class *as planned*. . .Mandelstam was destroyed *as a class*, Zamiatin was forbidden to write *as a class*."⁷² Berberova evoked the Marxist language of the regime when she calls the intelligentsia a "class" though her emphasis on plans emphasizes that these things happened as a result of human decisions rather than depersonalized stages of history. Berberova's certainty that she would have been a part of that group emphasizes that her exile was a choice to join those intellectuals who

⁷² Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 143-44.

wanted to make their own “plans,” entirely separate from the Soviet agenda, and perhaps to preserve herself ‘as a class.’

Defending Freedom

Berberova was also careful to emphasize the difficulties presented by return, continuing her focus on artistic freedom. She quoted critical articles dismissing Khodasevich and Ehrenburg’s literary worth, and emphasizes that contrary to what these critics believed, these writers “did not fear the masses they certainly feared literary bureaucrats,” who she blamed for the deaths of Mandelstam, Babel, and Mayakovsky. Berberova’s disparagement of Soviet literary critics suggests that she, like Ivan Bunin, was involved and interested in the ongoing argument between the new state and the emigration. Her claim that the Soviet bureaucrats were the real problem rather than the Russian people may also be read as an attack on the idea that the emigration was isolated from ‘the people.’ The continued references to victims of Stalinist Terror suggest that Berberova felt compelled consistently to remind her audience of the conditions in Soviet Russia that literary émigrés avoided. She implied that the émigrés were practical survivors, rather than disgruntled ideologues. Berberova emphasized that Soviet commentaries in this vein “cut off the road to Russia,” and Berberova emphasized that “nothing can change, as the seal on our passports cannot be changed.”⁷³ She was referring to Nansen Passports, the identification document given to stateless persons by the League of Nations. Her description of the seal suggested that Russian writers in exile had made an irrevocable choice. Their choice of statelessness and relative poverty rather than staying in or returning to the Soviet state was a final one. In this aspect, her writings contrasted with diaries and letters from the time period which

⁷³ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 217-218, 220.

emphasized that many émigrés viewed exile as a temporary state.⁷⁴ Berberova's emphasis on permanence may suggest that hindsight colored her recollections. Further, this claim emphasized the lasting commitment exiles had made—a commitment to suffering and deprivation. Thus, Berberova's descriptions of early exile life suggest that a key part of her motivation was to create sympathy and legitimate the group with which she identified.

Competing with the Soviets

While these writers denigrated Soviet cultural policy as a way of expressing their opposition, they also celebrated the value of émigré literature and culture, arguing for their own superiority as they critiqued opponents. Bunin's struggles to win the Nobel Prize for literature are particularly illuminating from the standpoint of ideology and the interactive relationship between émigré and Soviet literature. Correspondence on this subject suggests that this particular contest served as another struggle for legitimacy among émigré literary figures. Mark Aldanov, an émigré writer and friend of Bunin's, frequently corresponded with him on this topic, and his letters highlight the level of political and ideological importance attached to the Nobel Prize, and Bunin's potential victory. In 1922, Aldanov supported a 'triple candidacy' of Bunin, Dmitri Merezhkovsky, and Alexander Kuprin, citing that having three writers who rejected the Soviet state would have more "political fallout," and assure a victory for Russian literature. Aldanov's commentary indicated that a Nobel Prize meant more than a recognition of Bunin's artistic talent. Instead, his main focus was the ideological importance of an émigré victory—his letter suggests that if the Academy chose Bunin, this would serve as some sort of recognition that the émigré rejection of the Soviet state and its literature was legitimate. In a letter the next year, Aldanov reiterated the importance of having three émigré candidates in order to prevent Gorky from winning, and that it would

⁷⁴ For hopes of return in diaries, see Ivan Bunin, *The Cursed Days*. For more on the hope of return in secondary literature, see Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 4-5.

be best if the Swedish jury had to choose between émigrés and Soviets.⁷⁵ Thus, Gorky's candidacy represented an ideological challenge as well as an artistic one. Aldanov's view of the Nobel competition amply demonstrated the connections between politics and literature.

Soviet commentary on the competition revealed a similar focus on ideological issues to that found in Aldanov's correspondence. A reviewer in a 1925 article claimed that Bunin had been "preparing his artillery" to win the Nobel Prize, and that the entire emigration was "mobilizing all forces" to help him reach his goal. In contrast to Aldanov's encouragement, the Soviet review belittled Bunin's reception abroad and called him "maudlin" and his work a "parody," and claimed that French audiences laughed at it. The reviewer declared that Gorky was most likely to win, given his support from writers like Romain Rolland and Anatole France known to be sympathetic to the Soviet cause, as well as unnamed 'others.'⁷⁶ The reviewer's personal distaste for Bunin was corroborated by the alleged agreement of French critics—suggesting that Bunin's support was limited to émigré audiences, thus marginalizing his importance. The reference to "others" was vague enough to suggest either exaggeration or a multitude too numerous to name, depending on the viewpoint of the reader. The reviewer's militaristic language of artillery and force mobilization also adds to the impression of battle—as if the Civil War's battles were being fought anew on a literary front.

Reactions to Victory

The responses from émigré and global audiences to Bunin's Nobel Prize award in 1933 emphasize that he had significant symbolic importance for collective émigré identity, particularly the importance of being proven 'right' in the argument about the legitimacy of the Soviet state and its new literary direction. Letters, telegrams and other commentary

⁷⁵ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 86, 106, 243

⁷⁶ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 138, 195.

treated Bunin's victory as a personal triumph—the writers of these sources frequently indicated that it renewed their sense of self as Russians. Peter Struve, a pre-Revolutionary politician and member of the Constitutional Democratic party, claimed that Bunin served as a witness for a “single Russian culture,” and to the emigration's past glories and future greatness. Bunin explicitly endorsed this view, claiming in an interview that the prize was a “gift to the entire Russian emigration.” These arguments emphasized that Bunin's symbolic power extended into the wider émigré community, and could reinforce its self-definition as significant and superior to Soviet culture. Struve's speech insisted on the unity of Russian culture—suggesting that Soviet literature, specifically socialist realism in this context, was not worthy of notice. Further, his insistence that the emigration had impact for the future suggested Struve anticipated criticisms that the emigration had lost relevance to contemporary life. Other émigrés commented that the Swedish decision to honor Bunin led them to “forgive” European recognition of the Soviet government, because it recognized their “living symbol” of Russian literature.⁷⁷ This sense of the recent past added to the image of émigrés as long suffering but triumphant over adversity. Further, the labeling of the Nobel decision as indicative of broader “European trends” asserted that Bunin's support was broad-based.

Problems of Recognition

The political and ideological issues surrounding official recognition of Bunin's achievements were highlighted in the speeches and memoirs which discussed the Nobel ceremony itself. Though these sources did celebrate Bunin, they often criticized the Soviet response to him—using the opportunity presented to craft a view of the Soviets which suited their purposes. The émigré journalist Andrei Sedykh claimed in his memoir that

⁷⁷ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 283-84, 289-90, 299.

because of his unspecified critical comments, Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet ambassador to Sweden, decided not to attend the awards ceremony. The retelling of this event revealed as much about Sedykh as it did about Bunin—he attributed Kollontai’s refusal to his own agency rather than potential political pressures or her own personal feelings. Kollontai’s absence apparently “increased Swedish sympathy” for Bunin’s exile status.⁷⁸ More significantly, Sedykh’s version of the incident allowed Bunin to be cast as a suffering figure, his Swedish audiences all too aware of his plight. This version of events cast Bunin and Sedykh as triumphant in the face of Kollontai’s intolerance—they won greater understanding of the émigré situation, and the Soviets were proven intolerant in their unwillingness to recognize Bunin’s literary gifts.

Critique of the Soviet reaction continued when an émigré reporter claimed that the emigration’s literature had been recognized as the truly national art form, in spite of the “hypocrisy and falseness,” of the Bolshevik regime in refusing to recognize Bunin’s accomplishments by letting the public know about his award, even as his works were still reprinted in the USSR.⁷⁹ In this version of events, the Soviet government ignored that Bunin earned a crucial victory for the émigré argument on the nature of Russian national literature and governmental legitimacy. If earlier rhetoric on the Soviet side was militaristic and reminiscent of the Civil War, the language here was a taunting response to a shameful retreat. The reminder that Bunin was still being printed in Russia suggests the reporter was eager to prove that the Soviets recognized his value on some level. Swedish Academy Member Per Hallstrom’s presentation address presented another side of the efforts to create an official memory of Bunin as part of his new status. Hallstrom claimed in his speech that Bunin’s achievements had been “clearly recognized and defined, almost without a divergence

⁷⁸ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 293.

⁷⁹ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 300.

of opinion.”⁸⁰ Hallstrom’s speech glossed over the political-ideological bitterness that is clear in most conversations surrounding Bunin. His speech presents Bunin as an uncontested figure, a universally recognized genius. Clearly, émigré writers were much more willing to declare Bunin’s selection a profound political statement than were Swedish officials.

Critiquing Europe

Nabokov and Berberova each expressed displeasure at the naiveté of Europeans who did not understand the degree of artistic repression they would have faced in the Soviet Union—Indeed, their contempt for Soviet Russia was nearly matched by their disdain for their host countries. Nabokov’s discussion of his undergraduate years in Cambridge strongly emphasized a sense of émigré separation and superiority vis-à-vis Europeans. According to Nabokov, his Cambridge classmates spoke “astonishing drivel,” about Russia. They considered all émigrés “Czarist elements, much as Soviet propagandists today use the term fascist.” Nabokov’s comparison of his classmates to Soviet propagandists, intimated that they parroted stock phrases without real analytical thought. Nabokov particularly mocked young intellectuals who failed to recognize that they would have been “destroyed by Lenin’s regime as naturally as rabbits are by ferrets and farmers.”⁸¹ His awareness that such young and sincere socialist sympathizers would have been major targets of the Soviet regime parallels Berberova’s strong feelings about the plight of the intelligentsia, especially his sense that it was somehow in the ‘nature’ of the Soviet regime to threaten intellectual freedom. Further, his nature imagery emphasized the naïve character of his classmates, and that they would be helpless in the face of genuine repression.

⁸⁰ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 296.

⁸¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 205.

Berberova's depictions of the increasingly hostile literary environment of the Soviet Union were meant to help her argument about why so many Russians have chosen exile. Her descriptions of European politics and intellectual climates emphasize both her conceptions of Russia and her anger at those who do not properly value the emigration and its struggles. Berberova identified not only political and economic divisions between the émigrés and the societies in which they lived, but spiritual and moral ones as well. Berberova became a pessimist vis-à-vis Europeans as she described the 1920s and 1930s—claiming that “in England imbeciles reigned, in France living corpses, in Germany, villains, and in Russia villains and bureaucrats.” Berberova suggested that European elites belonged in a similar category with Nicholas II and the Provisional Government. In her view, Russia's catastrophe was part of a trend rather than exceptional, in contrast to her earlier point that only certain countries have revolutions. She also characterized the USSR's situation as a “Thermidor.” The comparison to the French Revolution adds to the sense that Russia was following a European pattern, and potentially claiming a similar failure for Russia's revolutionary project. She also claimed that there was “not one voice that would have been *for us*, who would have lifted his voice against the persecution of the intelligentsia,” since older socialists like H. G. Wells were enthralled with the new state's policies and the younger generations were indifferent.⁸² Intellectual elites and governmental policies were equally worthy of Berberova's criticism, adding to a sense of general incompetence which gave Berberova and other émigrés a sense of profound disillusionment.

⁸² Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 223-226. For more on comparisons of Russian development with the French Revolution, see Dmitri Shlapentokh, “Thermidor or Mongol Empire: History as Political Model in Russian Émigré Thought,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 32, no. 3 (1991), 379-408.

European Terrors

Berberova's anger at European intellectuals continued as she discussed in detail European reactions to rumors of Stalinist persecutions. She emphasized not only European moral bankruptcy, but also the struggles of the émigrés to reveal the truth. Berberova included in its entirety a 1927 anonymous letter from Russian intellectuals who asked why Europeans had not recognized the censorship in the Soviet Union, and begged them to make their sufferings apparent to the world, so that the torture they faced would not be meaningless. Berberova declared that the authorship of the letter, and even its authenticity, was of no concern to her. "For if it was a forgery, what a prophetic forgery!"⁸³ It also indicated that she had faith in the value of the letter's contents. Her claim that she did not care about authorship or authenticity suggested that its ideological impact and support for what the émigrés believed about the Soviet system were more important than the corroboration of details. For Berberova, objective analysis of this document was not important—the identity of these individuals as writers gives them a worth and credibility that the Soviets could not match.

She went on to note that despite the efforts of Ivan Bunin and Konstantin Balmont to publicize the letter's contents, the "European" reply was "you have lost your estates and bank accounts—we sympathize, but we don't want anything to do with you." She also denigrated the French Socialist Romain Rolland, who accepted Maxim Gorky's version of events that the lot of many writers had improved after the Revolution. Berberova refuted this citing that most of the writers on Gorky's list were later repressed in some way, for example Isaak Babel and Boris Pilniak. Berberova emphasized the insensitivity and ignorance of the European response to the emigration's plight—they saw the émigrés only as

⁸³ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 228-232.

disgruntled materialists. She critiqued specific intellectuals for their willful ignorance, notably Rolland's uncritical acceptance of Gorky's version of events. Though Berberova claimed that the details of the letter did not matter, she interrogated the details of Gorky's response—emphasizing that her preoccupation with the truth was selective and had a highly emotional component. Berberova concluded with a declaration that during the 1930s, Russian émigrés were the “Akaky Akakyeviches of the universe,” referring to the hapless protagonist of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat*.⁸⁴ Her claim that the emigration was similar to Gogol's protagonist cemented her images of suffering and victimization. Just as Akakii Akakiievich cannot make imperial bureaucrats appreciate what he has lost after his overcoat is stolen, the emigration cannot make Europeans understand their situation. Significantly, at the end of the story, Akakii haunts the bureaucrat who would not hear his concerns until he gets an overcoat to replace his stolen one. This potentially alluded to the émigré mission to haunt European consciences.

Émigré Solidarity

Nabokov's discussions of the émigré intelligentsia highlighted not only his self-identification with this group, but also his pride in its accomplishments and its superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet regime. Nabokov declared that most “liberal-minded” Russian intellectuals emigrated, and that the Bolsheviks achieved “the complete curbing of minds to the government's will,” something the tsarist regime had never accomplished. He also commented on the alleged futility of the émigré creative enterprise and its operation in a “fragile unreality” due to the small size of its audience. Nabokov's claim that the best of Russia resided abroad is similar to Robert Johnston's claim that most émigrés felt that while they lacked a state, they were the true possessors of Russian culture. Hana Pichova also

⁸⁴ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 232-235. For a brief description of Akak Akakyevich and *The Overcoat*, see *The Portable Nineteenth Century Russian Reader*, ed. George Gibian (New York: Penguin, 1993), 199-202.

argues that in the absence of a state, culture is the most valued possession of the exiled writer.⁸⁵ The reference to the “fragile unreality” of émigré literary life seems a tacit admission of the relative weakness of these writers to have significant global impact. Despite these admissions, Nabokov also claimed émigré works were “more suitable for human consumption,” than those of their Soviet counterparts.⁸⁶ He also clearly believed that the moral dimension mattered more than the number of copies sold or printed. Soviet literature was portrayed as beneath human intellect, such that even if the émigrés were not celebrated on a grand scale, they have benefited humanity in moral terms. These sections of *Speak, Memory* emphasize that Nabokov’s ‘quarrel’ with the Soviets was also a cultural one, suggesting that both his identity as a writer and his mourning for his childhood influenced his critique.

Nabokov’s artistically focused critique of the Soviet regime continued as he discussed the problem of intellectual freedom. He admitted that it would be easy to “poke fun” at émigré preoccupations, but he also argued that since these writers were “rebels as most major Russian writers had been,” they deserved credit for their efforts. Nabokov’s apparent need to defend émigré culture and decisions reiterated that he clearly identified with these intellectuals. His placement of the émigrés in a “rebel” tradition of Russian literature suggested that they were honoring a worthy heritage. That the opposite was true of cultural life in the Soviet Union reaffirms the traditional opposition between the two groups, and connects Nabokov’s criticisms with Berberova’s and Bunin’s. Further, Nabokov indicated that most émigrés regarded Soviet writers as “un-Russian,” and were horrified that they practiced “the art of prostration,” and spent most of their time trying to gauge official

⁸⁵Johnston, *New Mecca, New Babylon*, 29; Hana Pichova, *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 69.

⁸⁶Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 219-221.

demands for their work.⁸⁷ Soviet writers displayed a total lack of creativity and almost slavish submission to authority—in clear contrast to Nabokov’s depiction of the émigré ‘rebellion,’ made of up ‘real’ writers of spirit and energy.

Collective Strength

Bunin, Berberova, and Nabokov also discussed their sense of connection to fellow émigrés, suggesting that shared experience of exile as well as opposition to the Soviet created collective identity. These memories suggest that each writer crafted their definitions of what it meant to be an émigré and what was most valuable about exile. Bunin gave a lecture on the importance of “mission” for the Paris community of exiles in 1924 which served as one window into these views. He argued that the emigration served as an example that not all of Russia had embraced Bolshevism, and that émigré testimony proved that “one of the blackest and perhaps most fatal pages of history is now being written.” Here, the Bolsheviks were shaping history, but in a depraved narrative rather than a glorious one. But Bunin’s later catalogue specifically emphasized actions that the emigration had been able to carry out, making them into historical agents rather than passive victims. “In whose name do we [the emigration] act?” Bunin asked, and responded that the emigration not only acted in a “Divine image,” but also that it acted in the interests of Russia, interests that the world had ignored. He declared that the West’s attitude toward Russia is “like the Roman soldier who touched the lips of Christ with a sponge soaked in vinegar and looked passively on a six year pogrom.”⁸⁸ Bunin’s arguments for the sources of this moral authority, rooted in God and Biblical allusions, may be read as an attempt to sanctify all émigrés. This sanctification was set up in direct contrast to the “black” nature of Soviet Russia. Further, acts in such a “divine image” were presumably free from selfish human concerns, suggesting that the

⁸⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 221.

⁸⁸ Bunin, *From the Other Shore*, 125-26.

emigration had risen above human failings. Bunin's allusions also revealed particular images of Russia vis-à-vis the West. The explicit connection of the country with Christ and Western nations with the Roman soldier who gave him wine was a clear allusion to a betrayal. In their neglect and ignorance, these passive observers killed another savior—and in Bunin's view they were damned for it. The claim that the years from 1914-1920 were a "pogrom" not only evoked images of bloodshed and terror, but also identified its perpetrators with the earlier bigotry and hatred against Jews during the tsarist period. With this word, Bunin identified exiled Russians with the Jews who had been separated forcibly from their ancestral homeland.

Shared Isolation and Hardship

Berberova's sense of collective identity was clear in her attention to the plight of the Russian émigrés in Paris. Her discussion of the material and spiritual circumstances of the emigration as she recalled them after her arrival served as an argument that the émigrés had lost much and suffered much, while the allusions to the Soviet alternative served to justify the worth of such an existence. The early impressions of émigrés in Berberova's narrative centered on problems of daily life. Berberova claimed that the "right," a group whose members she did not name, continued ties to Orthodoxy, and some began to work as laborers in Russian restaurants or factories. Berberova declared that "the valiant troops of the White Armies carried on valiantly," and described parades in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Berberova's description of the "right" emphasized symbols of tradition, and the attention to the new occupations suggests that Berberova wanted to call attention to lost status—particularly with the claim that the "troops" were still carrying on, though now they only marched in Paris, an image of blustering impotence rather than military prowess. In contrast to their ideological opposites, writers on the "left" were described by name.

Berberova called Boris Poplavsky and Ilya Ehrenburg “homeless, talented, and confused.” The portrait eventually shifts away from distinctions and toward commonalities—“all...did not know what they would do the next day or where they would live, and instead sat in front of a cup of coffee on a café terrace.”⁸⁹ Berberova distinguished émigrés by the political statements they made abroad, rather than their pre-Revolutionary actions or their status during the Civil War. The left were no more purposeful than the right. All were described in terms of wasted intellectual potential rather than accomplishments. Yet the political labels were ultimately cast aside, and the final image was one of group indecision, almost paralysis—the émigrés had no plan of action, no sense of purpose, and so they merely sat. Berberova’s main symbol of collective émigré identity is the Nansen Passport. She declared that the passport was for “people without a homeland, who do not have the right to belong to proletarians, white collar workers, or those who have a steady home and income...we learn to divide every earned kopeck in half.”⁹⁰ Her choice of “homeland,” emphasized the emotional loss the passport represented, while the catalogue of limits placed on émigré activity emphasizes that while a Nansen passport might have linked Russian exiles to each other, it separated them from normal society.

Like Berberova, Nabokov also discussed a sense of solidarity with fellow émigrés in terms of isolation and tribulations, though he also focused on triumphs. Nabokov expressed a particular revulsion for the “bureaucratic hell” the émigrés faced, and he claimed that the “inferior” Nansen passport meant that émigrés were frequently treated no better than criminals or resented by government officials as “bastards” for being stateless. Nabokov’s resentment of Nansen passports echoed Berberova’s, and continues the theme of

⁸⁹ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 213-14

⁹⁰ Berberova, *Italics Are Mine*, 215. For more on the Nansen Passport and the status of Russian exiles in their host countries, see Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 36-37.

antagonism between Russian émigrés and local Europeans. His emphasis on statelessness emphasized that rejection of the current Russian government was critical to his émigré identity. Further, his claim that statelessness was criminal in the eyes of some bureaucrats adds to a sense of émigré exceptionalism and collective hardships. Nabokov took particular pleasure in noting that some of his fellow émigrés managed to subvert the systems rather than be “bastards and ghosts.”⁹¹ His triumphant tone when he recorded the efforts of some Russians to refuse to be branded suggests that shared pride as well as shared suffering formed a part of Nabokov’s émigré self-definition. Nabokov also described the accomplishments and rewards of emigration, added to a sense of particular connectedness and solidarity when he commented that he had only a few friends in his decades in Europe who were not Russian intellectuals, since the émigré intelligentsia had “no reason to seek ties beyond its own circle.”⁹² While the section on bureaucratic issues emphasizes that Russian émigrés were often subject to the demands of ‘outsiders’ who did not understand them, this section emphasizes a nationalistic self-sufficiency. Even if émigrés depended on the hospitality and the good-will of bureaucrats, Nabokov insisted that they could meet their own intellectual needs. While the earlier sections emphasize alienation and dissatisfaction, Nabokov appeared to consider relying solely on other Russians for intellectual stimulation a benefit rather than a hardship.

The Writers Meet

Berberova’s discussion of her relationships with fellow writers emphasize that literature was not only a key tool in the struggle for cultural legitimacy, but also a source of solidarity that influenced her sense of belonging to an émigré community. Berberova clearly valued Bunin’s literary accomplishments and his significance in the political and cultural

⁹¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 217.

⁹² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 217

world not only of the literary émigrés, but of their pre-Revolutionary ancestors. If Bunin had been born thirty years later, she wrote, “he would have been one of the greats of our great past.”⁹³ Her suggestion with this comment that he perhaps was an almost ‘ahistorical,’ and to be pitied for his lost place in the literary firmament revealed another side of her writing, for she combined compassion with ridicule. She stressed his sense of self-importance and his spitefulness, describing how he ranted about which Russian writer was his model: “I’ll kill you! I’ll strangle you! Shut up! I come from Gogol!” She called him “obsolete and feudal,” implying that he had little to contribute to modern times. This anecdote also jars sharply with Bunin’s own musings about which literary traditions he belonged to. Vladimir Zenzinov, an older émigré who participated in the Provisional Government, recalled Bunin’s reminiscences as he traced his literary “genealogy” to Gogol and Pushkin, noting, “I have loved Gogol since childhood, he has always been a part of me.” Bunin traced his influences lucidly, praising their importance rather than ranting like a child throwing a tantrum.⁹⁴ The distinct differences between Zenzinov’s and Berberova’s accounts show that portrayals of Bunin could differ, though both recognized his importance in émigré literary circles. Berberova cited his Nobel Prize victory and the celebrations that surrounded it as proof that the literary emigration had “our own” holidays, separate from the religious celebrations of other émigrés. Thus, Bunin was part of what set the literary émigrés apart from other Russians in France. They made their own contributions to cultural life, their own memory.

Berberova was much more effusive and complimentary toward Nabokov than Bunin, suggesting that his literary activity better suited her literary attitudes and values. Nabokov was even more personally important to Berberova—she declared that because of

⁹³ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 250-51.

⁹⁴ Bunin, *Twilight of Émigré Russia*, 39-41.

him, “all my generation were justified. We were saved...Nabokov is the answer to all the doubts of the exiled.” He was important because he belonged not only to an exclusively national tradition, but had world significance as a writer.⁹⁵ In her narrative, Nabokov’s literary accomplishments did not belong to him alone. The claim that he “saved” her generation was almost religious in its tone. This power granted to Nabokov’s accomplishments suggest that for Berberova, the worth of exile was not mere resistance to return, but the continued existence of a creative and innovative national literature. For Berberova, Nabokov legitimized an entire generation that had chosen to leave Russia behind. Additionally, the claim that Nabokov’s significance transcended nationality and language extended his power beyond the ‘borders’ of the exiled nation.

Challenges to Cohesion

The Soviet government’s changing attitudes toward the emigration in the years after World War II had profound effects on Bunin, due to his status as a Nobel laureate, and the arguments he was involved in after the war indicate the potential for controversy and threats to émigré identity. Indeed, the emotions which surrounded these issues suggest that the definition of émigré status could be a contested topic rather than a settled status. Bunin did visit the Soviet embassy after World War II ended in June of 1946, and ultimately had to reassure friends like Aldanov that his visit did not mean he was leaving for the Soviet Union. Aldanov often reminded Bunin of the difficulties he would face in returning—that Soviet money would be worthless “for there is nothing to buy there.” He also emphasized that Bunin’s embassy visit was “a political act,” and that Bunin was naïve not to consider émigré opinion of his decisions. Aldanov also said that Bunin’s visit signified his interest in return, and that “if you have decided to stay in the West, I do not understand why you went there

⁹⁵ Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 315-321.

[to the embassy],” Aldanov’s insistence that Bunin’s behavior had political meaning for the rest of the emigration bolsters this sense of his power. His argument also served as an appeal to collective responsibility—Bunin was more than an individual, and if he deviated from the view of émigré status as contingent on total rejection of the Soviet cause, an entire group was threatened. Aldanov’s discussion of the material obstacles to return emphasized that émigré images of the USSR rested largely on rhetorical strategies instead of experience. Nina Berberova claimed that visits of émigrés to the Soviet embassy, including Bunin’s, were the “beginning of the decay of the émigrés in general.” She also believed that Bunin’s politics changed after he “drank to Stalin’s health.” The editor of Bunin’s letters and works from this period of his life claims that this account is exaggerated and untrue.⁹⁶ Though Berberova’s claims about Bunin’s actions have been contested, her narrative emphasized that fears of deviation from a particular view of the Soviet regime were an important part of the émigré self-conception in this period for her as well as Aldanov. The image of Bunin drinking to Stalin’s health indicated that he felt a sense of comfort with a well-known symbol of totalitarian despotism—a turn away from émigré values Berberova considered anything but celebratory.

Bunin’s response to the 1946 Decree on Citizenship also emphasized that the Soviet government’s focus on émigré issues could provoke controversy within the exile community, since it threatened the oppositional aspect of émigré identity. In this context, Bunin’s role as a symbol of the emigration brought him more scrutiny. The decree allowed Russians in exile to elect Soviet citizenship, and also provided for the possibility of voluntary return. These

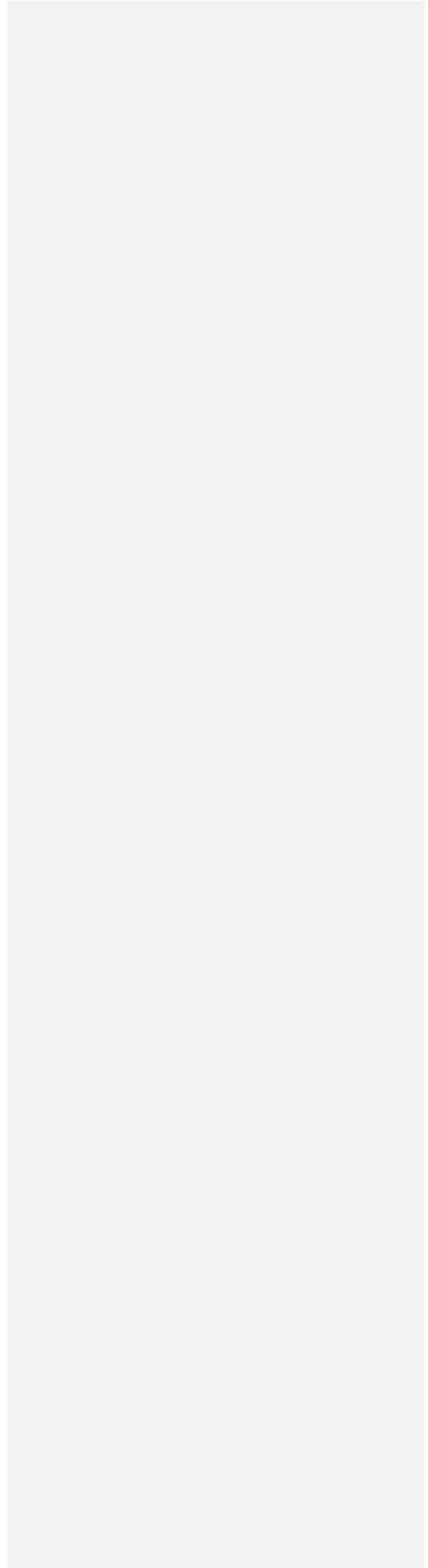
⁹⁶ Bunin, *Twilight of Émigré Russia*, 265-66, 274, 289-90. For the contested accounts of Bunin’s “crossing over” to reconcile with the Soviet regime, see Nina Berberova, *Italics are Mine*, 256-258. For more on embassy visits, see David M. Bethea, “1944-1953: Ivan Bunin and the Time of Troubles in Russian Émigré Literature,” *Slavic Review* 43, no. 1 (1984): 4, 6, 7.

⁹⁶ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 71.

pronouncements were simultaneously disorienting and welcome for many émigrés—many elected Soviet citizenship and some returned to Russia. Conflict erupted in émigré organizations—the Union of Émigré Writers voted to expel those who elected Soviet citizenship, and Bunin and his wife left the organization in response. These issues raised by the citizenship decree suggest an ongoing debate about who had the right to consider themselves an émigré. The official Union of Writers policy declared that total and unequivocal rejection of the Soviet government was essential. Many émigrés claimed that Bunin was no longer anti-Soviet because of his sympathy with the expelled members, and that he had lost his “power as a moral symbol.” Bunin called these criticisms exaggerated and asserted that he remained anti-Soviet. He also declared that his quitting the Union of Writers did not signify a change of political loyalties.⁹⁷ More significantly, the argument that Bunin had ceded his “moral superiority” by leaving the organization, suggests that a commitment to some “higher value” or more legitimate cause was a key part of émigré identity. Bunin’s rebuttal suggests that he held an alternative view—that his identity as an émigré remained intact, even as he was sympathetic to the desire of others to return home.

⁹⁷ Bunin, *Twilight of Émigré Russia*, 300, 320-23, 333, 336-341. For more on the political significance of the Union of Writers, see also Bethea, 8.

Conclusion



Struggle with Soviet Russia was a vital part of identity for the first ‘wave’ of Russian émigrés, specifically the struggle for interpretation of the national past, both tsarist and revolutionary. The October Revolution may be seen as the ‘foundation’ of exile memory, just as it was for the Soviet state. Émigré memoirs also presented views of the February Revolution and the tsarist period which further diminished October’s value and importance—perhaps more importantly, they emphasize that many of these attacks on the Soviet state had, by necessity, come from the past, since the émigré ‘present’ was largely removed from Soviet reality. This past-centered view of émigré opposition is somewhat complicated by hints that the Soviet state did respond to émigré ideas and challenges to legitimacy. Though my investigations into this subject have been somewhat limited, Soviet efforts to respond to Bunin’s symbolic power or discredit his importance emphasize the interrelationship between the Soviet regime and its émigré opposition, and that émigrés may not have lacked agency at all stages of this struggle.

The case study approach reveals a multiplicity of émigré viewpoints and preoccupations, emphasizing that each writer thought about Russia and exile differently. Berberova was much more strongly critical of the tsar and his government than was Nabokov, who saw lost potential in both the monarchist period and the February Revolution. Further, while Berberova primarily viewed herself as a member of the intelligentsia, Bunin and Nabokov each discussed class relationships in pre-Revolutionary Russia, though Nabokov was more critical of privilege and less concerned with critiquing inferiors. The celebration of émigré intellectual accomplishments compared to the more problematic Soviet literature emerged as a common theme across all three works. Berberova’s particular attention to both Bunin and Nabokov emphasized the connections

between all three writers and the insular nature of émigré communities. Her attention to the controversy surrounding Bunin's embassy visit, and his combative responses, emphasized that consensus on what constituted émigré identity was often elusive. Further, this identity could be perceived as under attack not only from established Soviet enemies, but also through the dissemination of potentially pro-Soviet ideas.

The problem of isolation and loss is another important preoccupation revealed in these three case studies. While all three memoirs included celebratory images of the national past and cultural pasts, each moment of remembered joy was often followed by a sense of deprivation and loss as a result of the Revolution. Nabokov's claim that his memories had more value than the family pavilion may have provided him with a sense of consolation, but the anecdote also brought out the sense of permanent separation from the Russia he loved. This sense of loss was also accompanied by isolation from host societies, since the status granted by the Nansen passport acted as a barrier to integration, as differing views of the Soviet state did. Recollection, however, also provided reassurance that remaining in exile had rewards of its own, separate from the consolation of belonging to a state. Nabokov's conviction that exile had shaped his character for the better, along with Berberova's faith that her generation had given something back to the world, as earlier groups of exiles had, suggest that exile status itself had to be granted worth and legitimacy, along with the worth of émigré arguments about the Soviet state.

In his 1972 work on Russian émigrés in Berlin, the historian Robert Williams writes, "the émigré can live anywhere because he lives nowhere. His home is a memory; his house is a temporary residence. Only in his mind can he live comfortably amid the furnishings of old dreams and new expectations."⁹⁸ The memoirs of Bunin, Nabokov and Berberova provide

⁹⁸Williams, *Culture in Exile*, 371-2.

insight into the interior of émigré houses. While I have examined, to some extent, how these three writers related to their contemporary communities and to each other, it is in their relationships to the past, their choices of construction, that their identities were most clearly drawn. Memory provided them with a legitimate home when Soviet Russia proved inhospitable. Yet the state which they rejected also contributed to that home's structure, by providing sources of criticism. Thus, analysis of émigré memoirs highlights a complex, intertwined relationship of multiple identities.

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