

Muireann Maguire

Stalin's Ghosts

Gothic Themes in Early Soviet Literature

Stalin's Ghosts examines the impact of the Gothic-fantastic on Russian literature in the period 1920–1940. It shows how early Soviet-era authors, from well-known names including Fedor Gladkov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Andrei Platonov and Evgenii Zamiatin, to niche figures such as Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii and Aleksandr Beliaev, exploited traditional archetypes of this genre: the haunted castle, the deformed body, vampires, villains, madness and unnatural death. Complementing recent studies of Soviet culture by Eric Naiman and Lilya Kaganovsky, this book argues that Gothic-fantastic tropes functioned variously as a response to the traumas produced by revolution and civil war, as a vehicle for propaganda, and as a subtle mode of unwriting the cultural monolith of Socialist Realism.

Muireann Maguire is Career Development Fellow in Russian Literature and Culture at Wadham College, Oxford. Her research interests include Gothic aspects of Soviet literature, Russian émigré prose, and the representation of science and scientists in Russian literary and cinematic culture since 1850. *Red Spectres*, her translated selection of twentieth-century Russian Gothic tales, was published in 2012.



Stalin's Ghosts

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To all the ghosts ...

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Note on Translations and Transliteration

The Library of Congress system of transliteration has been used throughout (with exceptions made for names better known by standard spellings, e.g. Trotsky, Gorky, Dostoevsky). All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated; where I have cited translations by others, full publication details are given in a footnote at first mention. All subsequent mentions are accompanied by a page number in parentheses.

Introduction

In Andrei Siniavskii's fictionalized memoir *Spokoinoi nochi* [*Goodnight!*] (1984), the ghost of Joseph Stalin, newly-deceased General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, appears on a March night in 1953 to Alla, a female prisoner in Siberia's notorious Vorkuta camp. Stalin manifests himself as an archetypal spectre, an ice-cold, transparent phantom:

Ни тени от него не падало, не слышалось дуновения, и само похолодание не бежало по комнате, хотя средоточие холода было рукой подать, притронься – и отмерзнет [...]. Как будто он замкнулся в замороженном своем одиночестве.¹

[He cast no shadow, no breathing could be heard, and the coldness did not even spread through the room, though [...] it was so concentrated that if you touched it, it would freeze your hand off. He seemed locked in his frozen solitude.]²

So far, so Gothic: Siniavskii's plot features a solitary and vulnerable heroine and a midnight visitation from a terrifying ghost. In most Gothic tales, ghostly visitors either demand, or perform, some type of service. Stalin has come with a demand: if he can force or trick Alla into forgiving him on behalf of all the political prisoners sentenced by him, his spirit will be set free. But at this point, Siniavskii reverses the usual scenario. His ghost story unexpectedly gives Alla, a victim of Stalin's summary justice, the opportunity to exact retributive justice of her own. She orders the ghost to undertake a futile quest for redemption by finding and apologizing to every individual he ever sinned against during his lifetime. The Sisyphean hopelessness of such a task is perhaps fitting for crimes such as Stalin's,

1 Abram Terts (pseudonym of Andrei Siniavskii), *Spokoinoi nochi* (Paris: Syntaxis, 1984), p. 278.

2 Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky), *Goodnight!*, trans. Richard Lourie (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 228–9. All further page references for this translation will be indicated by a number in parentheses within the main text.

committed on an almost unimaginable scale. Alla's final injunction to Stalin's ghost is uncompromising:

А теперь – обойди всех! По одному, по очереди – кому ты должен. Живых и мертвых. И пусть тебя каждый, отдельно, простит. Вымаливай именем Господа ...³

[And now go round to all of them! One at a time, each one in turn. Everyone whose forgiveness you need. The living and the dead. And let each one of them forgive you individually. Beseech them in the name of our Lord ...] (235)

Stalin's ghost reluctantly but obediently disappears to commence a long sequence of penitent hauntings. The title of this book, *Stalin's Ghosts*, does not indicate that its author has embarked on a similar quest to track down every evocation of Stalin as a spectre in modern literature, fascinating as that task might prove. Instead, this book pursues those ghosts which haunted Russian literature during Stalin's ascent to supreme power in the Soviet Union. The years between 1920 and 1940 were defined politically by Stalin's consolidation of power within the Communist Party, the first three Five-Year Plans to stimulate Soviet industry and electrification, the mass collectivization of agriculture, and the Great Purge of the 1930s, which decimated the ranks of military officers and other professional classes in Soviet society. Literature in these two decades underwent a simultaneous intensification of censorship and of central control, signalled by the formation of the Writers' Union in 1932 and the declaration of the doctrine of Socialist Realism two years later, thereby commissioning – and condoning – the often boiler-plate plots of so-called 'revolutionary romanticism'.⁴

3 Terts, *Spokoynoi nochi*, p. 285.

4 'Revolutionary romanticism' was one of the key descriptors for Socialist Realism mentioned by Andrei Zhdanov in his speech at the 1934 Writers' Congress, as cited by Régine Robin in *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Cathy Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 61. Prevalent Western interpretations of the genre tend to challenge the monologism of Zhdanov's catchphrases. Robin herself called Socialist Realism a 'fragmentary multiplicity of microdiscourses' (p. 74). Katerina Clark's *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd edn (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) demonstrates the reliance of

The Russian literary supernatural, as one might expect, survived within experimental literature by fellow travellers; within popular genres such as science fiction; perhaps least surprisingly, in the uncanny nostalgia of émigré authors, and other schools and genres that borrowed from the Gothic attic. But in Soviet Russia, realism and optimism were enforced by decree. In the course of the 1920s, this transformation was consolidated by selection patterns practised by censors, publishers, and Party ideologues. By the first All-Russian Soviet Writers' Union Congress of August-September 1934, a consensus of Soviet writers reformulated the goals of Russian literature as *ideinost'*, *narodnost'* and *partiinnost'* [ideology, nationalism, and party solidarity]. Future Soviet fiction would depict reality not only as it was, but as it ought to be. At the same congress, the novelist (and later Writers' Union secretary) Konstantin Fedin announced with splendidly Gothic hyperbole that the Russian fantastic novel 'had died and been sealed in its tomb'.⁵

Despite the requirement for new Soviet literature to express both social realism and ideological conformity, the ghosts of Russian literature refused to be exorcized. This was not surprising; it would have been *more*

pre-Soviet and Soviet authors from Gorky to Gladkov on pre-existent narrative patterns, including the hagiographical text. Irina Gutkin, thoughtfully situating the genre in the long perspective of late nineteenth-century realism and modernism, suggests that Socialist Realism was a cultural phenomenon, neither wholly aesthetic nor wholly political in focus, which embodied 'the culmination of a desire for cultural stability in the aftermath of a protracted revolutionary-period upheaval' and which integrated the 'radical political and artistic avant-garde movements,' with a significant degree of ongoing exchange (*The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890–1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 4). Evgeny Dobrenko has argued in various publications that Socialist Realism was a 'wholly constructed project,' and a hyperreal, essentially static simulation of an originally Western cultural model ('Socialist Realism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, eds Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 97–113 (p. 103)). See also Dobrenko's *Formovka sovetskogo pisatel'ia: sotsial'nye i esteticheskie istoki sovetskoi literaturnoi kul'tury* (St Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1999), for an overview of the debates current in Soviet letters in the 1920s.

5 'умер и закопан в могилу', Konstantin Fedin, cited in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 August 1934, p. 2.

surprising had the Gothic-fantastic – that is, the characteristic tropes of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novel, often enriched by supernatural aspects, declared or implicit – *not* emerged as a mode within the canon of the Soviet novel. It survived, of course, in ‘writings for the drawer’ by conservative and traditional authors. Additionally, within the emergent Soviet media, as Eric Naiman has shown, a discourse of Gothic horror was used to manipulate insecurities among the general public; Gothic scenarios in news reporting and even in popular fiction probed the young culture’s ‘anxieties about being together and being alone.’⁶ Some popular fiction – notoriously Lev Gumilevskii’s *Sobachii pereulok* [*Dog Alley*] (1927) and Sergei Malashkin’s ‘Luna s pravoï storony’ [‘The Moon from the Right Side’] (1926) – also exploited fears about ideology, social origins, and sexuality, using updated ‘scare Gothic’ scenarios. Yet the primary survival of the Gothic-fantastic was not at the censored or non-literary margins of Soviet textual culture, but within the narrative core of Socialist Realism itself.

The arguments that scientific rationalism and literary realism unintentionally expose and even magnify the dark side of the human imagination are well-known in cultural studies; we need only recall Terry Castle’s observation on the eighteenth century that ‘the very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment – the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch – also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse.’⁷ Socialist Realism, however, unlike other discourses of positivism and rationality, not only revealed but actively constructed its opposite. It is now almost a truism that the hyperbolic narratives of Stalinist manhood directly inspired a counter-narrative of ‘radical dismemberment’, expressed via the broken, diseased, or scarred bodies of Socialist Realist

6 Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* [hereafter *SP*] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 130. See also Gregory Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

7 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 8.

heroes: Gleb Chumalov in Gladkov's *Tsement*, Pavel Korchagin in Nikolai Ostrovskii's *Kak zakalialas' stal'* [*How the Steel Was Tempered*] (1932–4), or Aleksei Meres'ev in Boris Polevoi's *Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke* [*A Story About A Real Man*] (1946).⁸ To become 'real men' in the Stalin-era pageant, would-be heroes had to renounce both masculinity (whether because of impotence caused by illness or actual castration) and physical integrity. The discourse of wholeness in Soviet Socialist Realist literature and cinema thus created a fictional 'reality' that was anything but whole. One is reminded, rather grotesquely, of the Velveteen Rabbit in the children's tale, who discovers that the path to Reality – that is, the enduring love and appreciation of children – lies through pain and physical debilitation: you only become Real after 'most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby', and, worst of all, only when you 'scarcely looked like a rabbit any more'. And yet 'when you are Real you don't mind being hurt'.⁹ Similarly, the pinnacle of Soviet manhood in Polevoi's story is not Meres'ev himself (a fictionalized version of a real-life pilot), but his mentor – the hideously bloated, pain-racked and bed-bound Commissar Vorob'ev. Despite and *because of* his reduced condition, Vorob'ev still commands universal hero-worship. After his funeral, a brother officer mourns, 'They're burying a real man ... They're burying a Bolshevik'.¹⁰

Realism resigns itself to such paradoxes, since its own essence is paradoxical: 'an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there'. All such efforts are foredoomed by the nature of communication: 'Language, in representing reality, most forcefully demonstrates reality's absence. At best, language creates the illusion

8 Lilya Kaganovsky, *How The Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Objectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2008), p. 7.

9 Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit, or, How Toys Become Real* (1922) (London: Mandarin, 1989), pp. 8–9.

10 'Настоящего человека хоронят ... Большевика хоронят'. Boris Polevoi, *Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*, 9 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1981–6), vol. 1 (1981), p. 365.

of reality'.¹¹ Ilya Vinitsky extends this idea, arguing that 'realism itself is a ghost: scholars call it elusive or even deny its existence, but they cannot do without it'.¹² If standard Victorian or modern neo-realism is ghostly, how much more genuinely spectral is Socialist Realism, as a literary discourse predicated on a model resurrected from the preceding century and targeted to express not what *is*, but what *must be*? As Evgeny Dobrenko warns, Socialist Realism was not merely literature: it was 'the machine that distils Soviet reality into socialism', 'the only material reality of socialism'.¹³ Rather than describing the present, Socialist Realism attempted to deform actuality and remake it on its own terms: no wonder that 'the works it produced are at once inferior as literature and significantly *larger* than literature' [my italics].¹⁴ Contrast the mysterious curse dogging the ambitions of the usurper Manfred in Horace Walpole's 1764 *The Castle of Otranto* (the first Gothic novel): that '*the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it*' (Walpole's italics).¹⁵ Just as Manfred, invoking laws of chivalry and succession which he knew his own occupation of the castle flouted, attempted to impose his heirs upon Otranto 'for the hopes of my race' (7), so the new Soviet canon, assuming the classical stability of nineteenth-century realism, attempted to project its aesthetic onto the immediate future. Like all usurpers, Socialist Realism was haunted; its heroes were sometimes deformed freaks (as Kaganovsky argues) or, more often, phantoms native to an ideal reality that was never embodied. Much like Manfred, Socialist Realism was doomed to dispossession in its turn by the 'real owner' of Russian literature – the creative mind grown too large for the confines and restraints of a centrally policed canon.

11 George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 6 and pp. 7–8.

12 Ilya Vinitsky, *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. xiv.

13 Dobrenko, 'Socialist Realism', pp. 111–12.

14 Dobrenko, 'Socialist Realism', p. 112.

15 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), ed. W. S. Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 17.

Stalin's Ghosts is neither a literary history of Stalin-era prose, nor a sequel to previous studies of Russian Gothic – although it may be read as a new chapter in the analysis of the European Gothic-fantastic. Instead, arguing from the premise that all realism leads inevitably to its opposite (particularly when constrained by such phantasmagorical criteria as Stalin's aesthetics), this book shows how Socialist Realism reconstituted, implied, and in some cases even became its own ultimate contradiction – the Gothic-fantastic. Where the fantastic is the natural antithesis of realism, the Gothic, with its connotations of decay, fatalism, and decline, is the reverse of the optimistic and progressive Soviet aesthetic. Moreover, Russian literature, to an even greater extent than other national literatures, has always been creatively dependent on nineteenth-century Gothic roots: '[o]ne of the better-kept dark secrets of modern Russian literature', wrote the critic Dale Peterson in 1987, 'is its intimate attachment to the deathless, some might say ghoulis, mode of Gothic romance'.¹⁶ Put otherwise, the more insistently Socialist Realist writers resisted Gothic narrative tropes and plot mechanisms, the more irresistibly these appeared in their fiction (itself a remarkably Gothic irony). This process of inadvertent absorption and unconscious reflection is important for understanding any cultural aesthetic – whether Communist, Fascist or neoliberal – that prides itself on being self-produced rather than derivative and accretive. (Not all Soviet use of Gothic was unintended, of course; as we shall see, there were multiple cases of its deliberate use, often in propaganda; but the effect of aesthetic adulteration was the same.)

This book studies the extended collision between Socialist Realism and the Gothic-fantastic between 1920 and 1940 by examining, in successive chapters, four key scenarios or tropes from the Gothic tradition (the haunted castle, the deformed body, the uncanny corpse, and the monster or villain) in the context of Soviet and other Russian literature during this time period. In each chapter, case studies of selected literary texts

16 Dale Peterson, untitled review, *Slavic and East European Journal*, 4: 31 (Winter 1987), 618–19 (p. 618).

from across the spectrum of political orthodoxy – from canonical Soviet novels to dissident writings that remained unpublished until after the fall of Communism – demonstrate the relevance and, frequently, the centrality of these tropes to the Soviet imagination. Often, their significance applies even beyond fictional narratives: the Gothic quandary of inheritance (biological or legal) was never more relevant than in early Soviet society; in Mikhail Bulgakov's most famous novel, a Mephistophelian devil and his confederates parody the social and political opportunism of inter-war Russia; in 1924, the corpse of a dead dictator was interred at the core of Stalin's Moscow. Socialist Realism sprawled across most genres of Soviet literature; *Stalin's Ghosts* accordingly investigates non-traditional categories such as science fiction and the adventure novel. In Russia as elsewhere, the origins and conventions of these apparently modern genres are surprisingly congruent with the Gothic aesthetic.¹⁷ My analysis does not usually reveal a deliberate or conscious challenge to Soviet aesthetics by writers engaged in the Gothic or fantastic modes. Rather, it uncovers even in the earliest Soviet prose a predisposition to entropy, a foreboding of collapse that foreshadows the gleefully untrammelled Gothic-fantastic irony of Russia's postmodernity and of contemporary writers like Boris Akunin, Dmitrii Bykov, and Viktor Pelevin.

The remainder of this chapter offers, respectively, some background to explain how the term 'Gothic-fantastic' (both halves of which are easy to misapply) will be used in this book; a brief history of the Russian Gothic and its interaction with European Gothic-fantastic literature; and, finally, a more detailed outline of the next six chapters.

17 See, for example, Patrick Brantlinger, 'The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 14:1 (Autumn 1980), 30–43; or Fred Botting, 'Twentieth-Century Gothic', in Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 101–17.

What is the Gothic-Fantastic?

In his lengthy essay *Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm?* [*What Is Socialist Realism?*] (1959), Siniavskii arguably never succeeded in answering his own question – if he had, he would have deprived numerous later scholars of a topic. He might as well have posed another notoriously difficult literary question: What is Gothic? Or indeed, what is the Gothic-fantastic? There is little consensus on either of these enquiries. (Aptly enough, Siniavskii ends his essay with a plea to the great masters of what we would call ‘the Gothic-fantastic’ – Gogol, Hoffmann, Dostoevsky – to ‘teach us to be truthful with the help of the absurd fantastic’).¹⁸

The Gothic can be defined chronologically as a genre of frequently bad novels and melodramatic short fiction published between the mid-1760s and the 1830s, with the heyday of the British Gothic novel occurring in the 1790s. Successive ‘Gothic waves’ of imitation broke upon America and Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century, and variations upon the same theme continue in various international literatures to the present day. The Gothic may also be defined typologically as a narrative mode with a characteristic range of tropes and emotional affect. Fred Botting identifies Gothic literature with ‘the writing of excess ... fascination with transgression and the anxiety over cultural limits and boundaries’. The ‘stock features’ of Gothic fiction include ‘tortuous, fragmented narratives’, highly ornamented prose and emotion-driven aesthetics, mysterious or supernatural villains, landscapes which are ‘desolate, alienating and full of menace’, and standard loci such as the castle or the old house.¹⁹ The Russian critics Malkina and Poliakova isolate similar topoi in their definition of the Gothic novel: an ancient castle or other ruin, an exotic, possibly medieval setting, the

18 ‘научат нас, как быть правдивыми с помощью нелепой фантазии’. Abram Terts (Andrei Siniavskii) *Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm, in Fantasticheskii mir Abrama Terts* (New York: Mezhdunarodnoe literaturnoe sodruzhestvo, 1967), pp. 399–446 (p. 446).

19 Botting, *Gothic*, pp. 1–3.

potential activity of supernatural forces, and the presence of a secret which is ‘usually – terrifying’.²⁰ Robert Miles defines the Gothic as ‘a discursive site ... a series of contemporaneously understood forms, devices, codes, figurations, for the expression of the “fragmented subject”’.²¹ Therefore we can read Gothic literature as an encoded library of buried terrors, whether individual or cultural. The supernatural becomes a framing device for the expression of secret guilt, unspeakable anxieties, and private terrors. David Punter’s strategy, failing a conclusive generic definition of Gothic, is to investigate Gothic ‘*narratives*, insofar as it is possible to isolate them from the surrounding culture’ (Punter’s italics).²² Punter isolates, among these Gothic narratives, paranoia (metonymic for many forms of madness and for fear of madness), barbarism (including the fear of genealogical degeneration), and taboo.

In selecting the Gothic-fantastic criteria for this book, I have plundered a literary mausoleum extending from *Sleepy Hollow* (where Washington Irving’s Headless Horseman terrified his victims) to the haunted castles and houses of the original English Gothic novel. Readers should not be surprised if blood-boltered spectres from the Radcliffean cupboard clank past in their medieval armour when re-reading Gladkov or Platonov, since the Gothic mode (like its tropes) tends to recur across genres and time periods. I fix the boundaries of the Gothic canon *per se* between 1764 (the publication date of Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*) and approximately 1900, shortly after the appearance of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896). Early Gothic novels such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron* (1777) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) established the

20 ‘обычно – страшная’. V. A. Malkina and A. A. Poliakova, “Kanon” goticheskogo romana i ego raznovidnosti, in *Goticheskaiia traditsiia v russkoi literature*, ed. N. D. Tamarchenko (Moscow: Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Gumanitarnyi Universitet, 2008), pp. 15–32 (p. 26).

21 Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy*, 2nd edn (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 3–4.

22 David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 2 vols (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1996), vol. 2 (1996), p. 146.

Gothic's close association with issues of property, inheritance and legitimacy. The relatively explicit sex, murders and other gruesome features of M. R. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806) created the subgenre of (often erotic) 'Horror Gothic', as distinct from Radcliffe's brand of spook-teasing: a softer, sentimental Gothic in which supernatural interpretations were dangled before the reader only to be ultimately withdrawn. Nineteenth-century Gothic prose witnessed a 'progressive internalization and recognition of fears as generated by the self';²³ psychological haunting gradually replaced the crude corporeality of animated skeletons and walking suits of armour. Throughout the century, Gothic authors responded to industrial and technological progress with fantasies of destruction and degeneration. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a Gothic parable of supernatural vengeance wreaked upon scientific arrogance. The mutated bodies and grotesque monsters in late nineteenth-century fiction by R. L. Stevenson, H. G. Wells, Arthur Machen and other British authors are widely interpreted as a response to the emergence of new scientific disciplines such as criminal anthropology and evolutionary theory.²⁴

Within this canon, three characteristically Gothic themes can be isolated: liminality, regression, and revelation. The first of these refers to the Gothic fascination with transgressing boundaries which are traditionally taboo, by blurring the distinctions between humans and animals; humans and machines; living and dead; or even between genders. The second universal Gothic preoccupation is regression or recidivism, whether individual or social. I define this as any form of reversion to a more primitive state, from the atmospheric dilapidation of a ruined building to evolutionary

23 Rosemary Jackson, *The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 24.

24 See Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. Chapter 6, pp. 155–75; Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) for more on the influence of anthropology and the social sciences on late Victorian Gothic horror.

degeneration. Regression may also be psychological, including moral decay and emotional infantilism – the Gothic is incorrigibly recidivist. In its ongoing effort to trade present for past, it challenges the Soviet (and Enlightenment) theme of utopian transformation head-on. Dale Peterson, defining Ivan Bunin's novella *Sukhodol* [*Dry Valley*] (1912) as a Gothic text, points out that 'The power of the past to command a repeat performance [...] is what Gothic story is all about'.²⁵ In Gothic narrative, the past restores itself by destroying the present.

The third and most crucial generic preoccupation of Gothic is revelation: the involuntary but irresistible purgation of memory via reality. This theme resonates with Freud's celebrated concept of the uncanny.²⁶ For patients undergoing psychoanalysis, revelation may comprise the cathartic recognition of repressed memories. In literature, revelation may signal the traumatic reassertion of long-lost family secrets, the righting of ancient wrongs, or the restoration of property to its legitimate owners. The theme of return contains within itself the previous themes of liminality and regression. Whether the thing repressed is a secret (a hidden will, a rumour of illegitimacy), a person (a lost heir, a wronged woman), an emotion (fear, lust, guilt) or a tangible object (a house, a murdered body), it will inevitably be publicly outed, if not restored. However, these buried secrets and wrongs are not guaranteed to rebound only on the perpetrators of injustice: they are at least equally likely to affect the wrongdoers' innocent and ignorant heirs. 'The revisiting of the sins of the fathers upon their children' is an essential trope of Gothic experience.²⁷

The role of the fantastic within Gothic is problematic. If we take Tzvetan Todorov's ineffable definition of the literary fantastic as the 'duration of uncertainty' in the mind of the reader over the plausibility of events in a given text, the fantastic then becomes 'a dividing line between the

25 Dale Peterson, 'Russian Gothic: The Deathless Paradoxes of Bunin's *Dry Valley*', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 1: 31 (1987), 36–49 (p. 38).

26 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *The Penguin Freud Library*, ed. James Strachey, 15 vols (London: Penguin, 1985–93), vol. 14 (1990), pp. 339–76.

27 Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, vol. 1, p. 46.

uncanny and the marvellous'.²⁸ In 'uncanny' fiction, according to Todorov, the reader's belief is suspended, but eventually resolved when the supernatural events or situation are rationally explained. This category includes the 'explained supernatural' of some Gothic novels, including Radcliffe's. In the 'marvellous', the supernatural is predicated as part of the fabric of existence, as when Bram Stoker posits the reality of vampires in *Dracula*. While the basic Gothic plot is not necessarily supernatural (and, as Radcliffe amply demonstrated, may end by expunging the supernatural completely), the Gothic novel relies heavily for narrative suspense on the *suggestion* of the supernatural. William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), usually classed as one of the first major Gothic novels,²⁹ partakes in all three Gothic tropes of liminality, regression and exposure without so much as a flicker of the phantasmatic. Yet its villain Falkland's power to pursue and persecute Caleb is fundamentally uncanny. Gothic fiction typically generates scenarios which are liminal between realism and the fantastic (for example, the creation of Frankenstein's monster is a fantastic-marvellous achievement, despite the spurious underlying science).

Neil Cornwell, following Todorov, defines 'the fantastic Gothic' as writing 'characterized by hesitation over the supernatural'.³⁰ Hence Pushkin's seminal 'Pikovaia dama' ['The Queen of Spades'] (1832) is Gothic-fantastic, because the apparition of the dead Countess can be read either as an hallucination by the overimaginative hero, or as a genuine supernatural manifestation. But following Todorov's criteria too narrowly would lead us to exclude the marvellous, the self-sustaining supernatural, like the vampires in A. K. Tolstoy's 'Sem'ia vurdalaka' ['The Family of the Vurdalak'] (1839), which demand unconditional suspension of disbelief.

To resolve these contradictions, the term 'Gothic-fantastic' as used in this book is predicated primarily on the Gothic. In the context of Gothic

28 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 25–7.

29 Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, vol. 1, pp. 118–24.

30 Neil Cornwell, 'Russian Gothic: An Introduction', in *The Gothic-Fantastic in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. Neil Cornwell (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA.: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 3–22 (p. 7).

fiction, I define the fantastic as any form of the supernatural, thereby including all three of Todorov's categories – the uncanny, the marvellous and the fantastic. The term 'Gothic-fantastic' will be used below to refer to fictions which are typologically Gothic and which may additionally include aspects of the supernatural, whether of the 'supernatural explained' (Todorov's uncanny) or the 'supernatural accepted' (Todorov's marvellous).³¹ This approach has the incidental effect of allowing us access to genres other than Gothic – such as Socialist Realism or science fiction – which employ Gothic tropes.

Russian Gothic

The centrality of the Gothic-fantastic to Russian fiction is almost impossible to exaggerate, and certainly exceptional in the context of world literature. The Gothic genre first spread to Russia via translations and pastiches of the British Gothic novel, the French 'roman noir' and the stories and novels of the German writer, E. T. A. Hoffmann, between the 1790s and the 1830s.³² Hoffmann's influence extends to the significant Gothic-fantastic writers of twentieth-century Russia, including Mikhail Bulgakov, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii and the less well-known Aleksandr Chaianov. Ann Radcliffe's novels were all available in French, German or Russian translations by the late 1790s. Nikolai Karamzin, Vasilii Zhukovskii, and Antonii Pogorel'skii, with Pushkin and Gogol not far behind, freely used Gothic tropes borrowed from their extensive reading of British, French, and German romances; the opening of *Evgenii Onegin* ironically references Charles Maturin's iconic *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Karamzin's short story 'Ostrov Borngol'ma' ['The Island of Borngol'm'] (1793) and Vladimir

31 Todorov, p. 40.

32 For a full account of the Russian reception of European Gothic fiction, see Vadim Vatsuro, *Goticheskii roman v Rossii* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002).

Odoevsky's 'Prividenie' ['The Apparition'] (1838) both re-render familiar Gothic topoi: respectively, an island with a beautiful prisoner and a castle haunted by a vengeful ghost. Odoevsky, a lifelong reader and imitator of Hoffmann, produced numerous short stories in the best Gothic-fantastic mode. Other nineteenth-century Gothic imitators include Osip Senkovskii, Aleksandr Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Mikhail Zagoskin, Vladimir Olin and A. K. Tolstoy.

Most of Russia's major nineteenth-century writers exploited Gothic-fantastic characters, plots or devices at least once during their careers. In the second half of the nineteenth century, fantastic and grotesque stories by Dickens and especially by Poe gained influence over the next generation of Russian writers, including Dostoevsky, who praised and adapted Poe's 'fantastic realism' to convey both atmosphere and psychological insight.³³ Even writers who apparently followed a more sober and literal realist path than Dostoevsky – like Ivan Turgenev and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin – become implicated in Gothic imagery and symbolism. The venerable tradition of the St Petersburg Tale, so essential to the Russian canon, is inseparable from evocation and parody of the Gothic-fantastic. Consider Pushkin's chilling 'Pikovaia dama' and ludicrous 'Grobovshchik' ['The Coffin-Maker'] (1830), Gogol's avid or vengeful ghosts in 'Shinel' ['The Overcoat'] (1842) or 'Portret' ['The Portrait'] (1835); Mikhail Lermontov's brief and open-ended 'Shtoss' ['Shtoss'] (1841), and many of Dostoevsky's works, from the early, transparently Hoffmannesque novella *Khoziaika* [*The Landlady*] (1847) to the chattering corpses of 'Bobok' ['Bobok'] (1873). Russian Symbolism learned its infatuation with the supernatural from haunted high Romanticism. Aleksandr Blok's poetry (and even his polemical essays) inhabit a crepuscular St Petersburg, stalked by vampires and succubi; Andrei Bely's *Peterburg* (1913) reanimated Pushkin's Bronze Horseman to haunt a *fin-de-siècle* would-be terrorist; while the short stories of Valerii Briusov and Fedor Sologub reprise a Hoffmannesque world of mirror doubles, unquiet spirits and unpaid historical debts. Even shortly after the October Revolution, a group of very young Soviet writers, taking

33 Jackson, pp. 133–7.

the Hoffmann-borrowed name of the Serapion Brothers, pursued a literary agenda that included the fantastic, if not the Gothic *per se*, until the end of the 1920s. The Gothic-fantastic had always lain at the heart of Realism and Romanticism in Russia; Socialist Realist ideologists, by recycling the tropes of both these genres, inevitably invoked the Gothic also. *Stalin's Ghosts*, in the following chapters, traces this insidious process of spectralization in *Soviet* prose.

Chapter 1, 'What is Soviet Gothic?' explores why and how Soviet realist prose became a natural matrix for the reassertion of Gothic narrative conventions. Some of this affinity can be traced to the prehistory of Russian Gothic and the tastes of individual writers; it also derived, in large measure, from the political tension between producing and restraining fear, between exploiting and succumbing to the potential of Gothic text, that Eric Naiman has characterized as 'NEP Gothic'. The second half of this chapter offers two brief case studies of 'Gothic' material from two now relatively little-known, but ideologically Soviet, authors – Nikolai Ognev and Maks Zhizhmor – to demonstrate this book's analytic method.

Chapter 2, 'Gothic Castles', traces the reinvention of the Gothic chronotope in Soviet prose. Traditionally conceived as the haunted castle or lonely monastery, Gothic space is in fact much more diverse, reproducing itself in different forms relative to different cultures and generations. Soviet Gothic loci are divided into two broad categories: properties with pasts (and therefore with ghosts) preceding the Revolution, and those built or inaugurated under the Soviet regime (and whose spectres-in-residence are therefore necessarily also Soviet). The first category includes the Ancient House of Evgenii Zamiatin's *My [We]* (1921), a luxury apartment block unsuccessfully collectivized in Bulgakov's 'No. 13: Dom El'pit Rabkommuna' ['No. 13 – The Elpit Workers' Commune Building'] (1922), and an abandoned cement factory in Gladkov's *Tsement*. All function as zones of overlap with an otherwise vanished past; all are inimical to the Soviet present and future. The second category includes hauntings deriving specifically from the failures of Soviet ideology, such as the haunted collective apartment in Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* [*The Master and Margarita*, 1966–7], the fantastically expanding flat in Krzhizhanovskii's 'Kvadraturin' ['Quadraturin'] (1926) and the eponymous foundation pit

in Platonov's *Kotlovan* [*The Foundation Pit*] (1930). The idea of usurpation is key here; many Gothic plots involve the usurpation of something intrinsic to the present, often immature generation by relatives who are old enough to know better. Uncles, grandparents, and step-relatives of all sorts abstract property, knowledge of rights, or life itself from the legal or moral heirs. We can see this dynamic at work in literature from every geographical corner of the Gothic-fantastic – in Grillparzer's *Die Ahnfrau* [*The Ancestress*] (1816), in Gogol's 'Strashnaia mest' ['A Terrible Vengeance'] (1832), in A. K. Tolstoy's 'Sem'ia vurdalaka', even in Aleksandr Blok's arguably 'filicidal' poetry (as Jennifer Presto suggests, Blok's poems may have been influenced by at least two of these three sources).³⁴

Chapter 3, 'Gothic Bodies' – a phrase borrowed from critical literature on late Victorian Gothic – examines how anxieties over science, medicine, and inherited qualities (whether physical, psychological, or political) informed the portrayal of the human body in Soviet fiction. Soviet ideology, premised on the creation of a 'utopian body' for the inhabitants of future socialist utopia, was all too often undermined by discourses informed by Darwinian evolution and theories of degeneration. Even in the major proto-Socialist Realist text, Maksim Gorky's *Mat'* [*Mother*] (1906), the idea of a 'dark shadow' of inherited degeneration which affects the Russian proletariat is overtly expressed:

Люди рождались с этою болезнью души, наследуя ее от отцов, и она черною тенью сопровождала их до могилы, побуждая в течение жизни к ряду поступков, отвратительных своей бесцельной жестокостью. [...] Ругали и били детей тяжело, но, в то же время, пьянство и драки молодежи казались старикам вполне законным явлением – когда отцы были молоды, они тоже пили и дрались, их тоже били матери и отцы. Жизнь всегда была такова – она ровно и медленно текла куда-то мутным потоком годы и годы и вся была связана крепкими, давними привычками думать и делать одно и то же, изо дня в день.³⁵

34 Jennifer Presto, *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius and the Symbolist Sublimation of Sex* (Madison, WN: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), pp. 41–69.

35 Maksim Gor'kii, *Mat'* (Berlin: Ladyschnikow, 1907), p. 7.

[People were born with this malady of the spirit inherited from their fathers, and like a dark shadow it accompanied them to the very grave, making them do things revolting in their senseless cruelty. [...] They cursed their children and beat them mercilessly, but the fighting and drinking of young people was taken as a matter of course; when the fathers had been young they too had fought and drunk, been thrashed in their turn by their mothers and fathers. Life had always been like that. It flowed on in a turbid stream, slowly and evenly, year after year, and everything was bound together by deep-rooted habits of doing and thinking the same thing day after day.]³⁶

Similarly, Ivan Moskva, the eponymous Komi factory manager in Boris Pil'niak's 1927 short story, is cursed from birth by his family heritage of syphilis, which destroys him mentally and physically just as he is pioneering new techniques for energy production. Other Soviet Gothic bodies are more provocative in their difference: the part-bestial bodies in satire and science fiction such as Bulgakov's dog-man Sharikov in *Sobach'e serdtse* [*Heart of a Dog*] (1925), the shark-man in Aleksandr Beliaev's novel *Chelovek-amfibiia* [*The Amphibian Man*] (1928), or the cat-capitalists in Marietta Shaginian's *Mess-Mend* (1924), among other examples, borrow images from evolutionary theory and the history of medicine in order to present speculative transformations of the human prototype. The irony of these grotesquely liminal fictional bodies is that they are often the unintended results of the quest for human physical perfection. This chapter explores how the Soviet preoccupation with self-transformation – into the utopian body – all too often produced deformed, atavistic, Gothic bodies.

Chapter 4, 'Gothic Death', focuses on tropes of death in Soviet fiction. The corpse, the cemetery, and other visual concepts of human mortality are all important constituents of canonical Gothic plot. This chapter introduces the idea of 'mortality myths' – counter-narratives of despair and decay that undermine the Soviet master narrative of progress and optimism – which contrast bitterly with the so-called 'immortality myths'³⁷ propagated by

36 M. Gorkii, *Mother*, trans. Margaret Wettlin (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), p. 11.

37 Irene Masing-Delic's terminology. See her *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

fin-de-siècle Russian philosophers and certain Soviet scientists and ideologues. Boundless early twentieth-century optimism led to suggestions, even within senior Soviet and scientific circles, that science would soon succeed in reversing or preventing death. The ‘mortality myths’ discussed in this chapter are an ideological riposte to this breed of utopianism. Read literally, as in Daniil Kharm’s ‘Starukha’ [‘The Old Woman’] (1939), mortality myths function as pseudo-scientific epistemologies of death. Read figuratively, mortality myths rebound destructively on the restrictions of life under the Soviet regime or suggest new symbolic values for death. Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii’s short story ‘Avtobiografiia trupa’ [‘Autobiography of a Corpse’] (1925) represents life in Soviet Russia as living death, while Nikolai Erdman’s play *Samoubiitsa* [The Suicide] (1930) suggests death is the only free statement a citizen can make. In Aleksandr Beliaev’s popular novel, *Golova professora Douelia* [Professor Dowell’s Head] (1925, revised 1937), a wicked scientist’s plan to cheat death by resurrecting corpses is frustrated by the vengeful circularity of Gothic plot.

Chapter 5, ‘Gothic Monsters’, probes the symbolism of the most sinister characters in Soviet Gothic prose: mortal and demonic villains, vampires, doubles, shape-shifters and even ghosts. Often used as political caricatures, these characters are a channel for satire and invective. Their targets may be individuals (frequently Stalin) or an entire regime. This chapter examines a range of monsters and villains from Woland, the demonic mastermind of Bulgakov’s *Master i Margarita* (composed during the final decade of the author’s life), to the patricidal *dvoinik* [double] in Krzhizhanovskii’s sinister ‘Fantom’ [‘The Phantom’] (1926). A subsection is devoted to the symbolic function of ghosts, particularly in émigré Russian literature.

Chapter 6, ‘Gothic Returns’, analyses selected fiction by the ‘Bulgakov cohort’ – four writers born at the end of the 1880s who deliberately opted to write in the Gothic-fantastic mode: Mikhail Bulgakov, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii, Aleksandr Chaianov, and Nikolai Ognev. Only this tiny minority of Soviet-era writers, however, adopted the Gothic-fantastic mode explicitly. Overt and sustained use of the supernatural, such as ghost stories or characters with occult powers, was extremely rare in Soviet fiction. The majority of Soviet Gothic writers disguised their use of Gothic tropes as a stylistic device within a recognisably realistic narrative structure.

For those writers who did pursue the Gothic-fantastic genre, their choice deprived them of the opportunity to publish many of their works during the Soviet period, although Bulgakov's unpublished writings were circulated posthumously as *samizdat* before the eventual publication of *Master i Margarita* in 1966–7. Krzhizhanovskii published almost none of his stories and novels during his lifetime, and Chaianov's stories were privately published in tiny print runs. Ognev's work, although it underwent severe criticism, was relatively widely published due to his moderately superior status as a fellow traveller.

Some other Soviet writers of this period published nominally 'fantastic' fiction (in Todorov's terms), including Leonid Leonov, Veniamin Kaverin and Aleksandr Grin (the pen-name of Aleksandr Stepanovich Grinevskii). But their work lacked the specific conventions of Gothic narrative. Moreover, in later life these writers distanced themselves from the fantastic genre. Grin resisted the categorization of his works as fantastic prose. His novella *Blistaiushchii mir* [*The Shining World*] (1924), the story of a man able to fly at will without wings, probably inspired Aleksandr Beliaev's *Ariel'* (1941), which will be discussed in Chapter 3. Yet when Iurii Olesha termed *Blistaiushchii mir* a 'fantastic novel', Grin's reaction was hostile:

Он почти оскорбился. 'Как это для фантастического романа? Это символический роман, а не фантастический! Это вовсе не человек летает, это парение души!'³⁸

[He almost took offence. 'How can this be a fantastic novel? It's a symbolic novel, not a fantastic one! This isn't a case of a man flying, but of the soul soaring!']

His stories were rooted in metaphysics rather than fantasy: he intended fantastic motifs as symbols of aesthetic and moral values, rather than integral components of his plots.³⁹ The Bulgakov cohort did not share Grin's prejudice; instead, they promoted the intertextuality of Russian Gothic

38 Iurii Olesha, *Ni dnia bez strochki: iz zapisnykh knizhek* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1965), p. 232.

39 For analysis of Grin's aesthetic principles, see I. K. Dunaevskaia, *Etiko-esteticheskaia kontseptsia cheloveka i prirody v tvorchestve A. Grina* (Riga: Zinatne, 1988).

prose by deliberately revisiting nineteenth-century Gothic-fantastic themes. Chaianov's personal library included A. K. Tolstoy's vampire legend 'Upyr' ['The Vampire'] (1841) besides works by Pogorel'skii and Odoevsky.⁴⁰ Bulgakov's library certainly included works by A. K. Tolstoy, Chaianov, Hoffmann and Gogol, while Krzhizhanovskii's bibliophilia extended to all the major nineteenth-century Gothic-fantastic authors.

In conclusion, *Stalin's Ghosts* looks briefly at some of the more prominent Gothic-fantastic themes and motifs in the work of later Soviet writers such as Anatolii Kim and Iurii Dombrovskii; by the late 1950s, such tropes had become deliberate, uncompromising signals of aberrance from the Soviet aesthetic. In the current postmodern period, when Russian literature is enjoying a Gothic-fantastic carnival, it is remarkable that the main function of Gothic tropes has become nostalgic. The Soviet experiment, like an ancestral haunt, is easier to accept – even appreciate – when ironically historicized through the Gothic veil.

40 See Aleksandr Bakhrakh, 'Moi priiatel' – Botanik X', in A. V. Chaianov, *Istoriia parikmakherskoi kukly i drugie sochineniia Botanika X* (New York: Russica, 1983), pp. 7–16 (p. 9).