

Advance Praise

"Mark R. Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin have assembled a who's-who of scholars on Eastern Europe and Eurasia, many of whom made their careers in the era after the end of communist rule. The authors are therefore particularly adept at separating 'historical legacies' from plain history – examining the precise ways in which the habits of the past may (and may not) matter in such diverse areas as policing, property rights, and economic performance. This book reminds us why edited volumes – carefully crafted around a common theme – are still indispensable vehicles of scholarly communication."

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– Edward Schatz, University of Toronto

Historical Legacies of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe

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Pokazukha and Cardiologist Khrenov

Soviet Legacies, Legacy Theater, and a Usable Past

Jessica Pisano

This chapter addresses not so much legacies themselves as the production of the appearance (or perception) of such legacies, and the work that such perception does in the world. Through an analysis of an episode of *pokazukha*, or political window dressing, that captured Russian media at the end of 2010, this chapter suggests two alternative lenses through which we might regard elements of the Soviet past that are still present today: legacy theater – evocations of the past that deliberately create an impression of continuity, even as they may disguise new aims; and usable pasts – social and linguistic repertoires of the past from which contemporary actors deliberately draw. The former seeks to recreate elements of the past in the present; the latter serve as a resource for interpretation of the present. Both legacy theater and usable pasts represent ways political, social, and economic actors reintroduce elements of Soviet experience into today's landscape. In contrast to legacies, which primarily express the structural residue of past regimes (here, state socialism), these two concepts permit us to understand the recurrent presence of certain elements of the Soviet past in terms that more explicitly recognize the agency of contemporary actors.

Historical legacies, understood as persistent institutional effects, do seem real and observable in many areas of postcommunist politics, economics, and society.¹ However, it is also the case that not all apparent legacies derive from the meaningful and unconscious integration of elements of the past into present practices. Not all legacies are true palimpsests. Instead, some “legacies” are the product of deliberate political maneuvering in the present: at times, political actors write the past onto the surface of the present, integrating elements of earlier historical experience into their organizational and symbolic repertoires to enhance their legitimacy and to consolidate power over political and material resources. From there, they pursue agendas and behaviors that may share little in common with the pasts they have invoked. Such institutions and practices are legacies in a sense, as they incorporate elements of the past,

but above all they are theater. Often, they are performances intended to invoke a sense of continuity with the past. In Eurasia, they often serve ends ideologically and practically at odds with the communist-era institutions, practices, ideas, and symbols they imitate. These performances are what this chapter calls legacy theater.

Still other invocations of Soviet-era experience might be usefully understood as a “usable past” or, given the changing character of Soviet rule over time, usable pasts (Brooks 1918; see also Commager 1967). This term, first used in early twentieth-century literary movements in the United States, has recently gained currency in Russian and Soviet studies as a general term for the conscious creation of a historical and literary canon (Britlinger 2000; Brandenberger 2009). In analyzing post-Soviet politics, this chapter suggests we might use the term in a way that more closely approaches its original meaning. For Van Wyck Brooks, who coined the phrase, and his circle, a “usable past” was not only a body of history and cultural production from which contemporary intellectuals could draw, but also a way of consciously and selectively reaching into the past to identify the sources of present challenges. Before Depression-era writers took up the idea a decade later, conceiving a “usable past” as more objectively construed historical work, the term was an instrument for critique of the past, designed, in Alfred Haworth Jones's words, “to justify a preconceived indictment of the present” (1971, 715). In applying this term to the post-Soviet present, this chapter identifies elements of Soviet cultural and political repertoires that may appear to reiterate or in some cases reaffirm Soviet vocabularies but serve instead as vehicles of criticism of the Soviet past and its apparent legacies in the present.²

Why is it important to distinguish among different ways the Soviet past is with us? One problem in the study of legacies is that phenotypical similarities between contemporary and historical political, economic, and social phenomena sometimes belie underlying shifts that have taken place. Interpreting elements of the past or formal similitude as persistence, we risk misreading actors' intentions: we may see people as simply repeating the past, even as they incorporate new practices in the service of entirely novel aims. Further, if we see only structure where there is also agency, we limit our political imaginations, our capacity to envision and anticipate change. If we fail to distinguish instances of persistence from legacy theater or usable pasts, we risk ossifying analytical paradigms – even as tectonic changes may be taking place. This chapter suggests that we require a framework that allows us to distinguish between historical residue and conscious uses of the past.

This chapter centers on a single instance of *pokazukha*: a call-in show on Russian national television in December 2010, in which a young doctor from Ivanovo confronted Vladimir Putin with an account of how officials and workers in his city staged a performance of well-funded health care in a hospital wing for the premier's visit. The event prompted a broad national discussion about political façades. This chapter examines this episode of *pokazukha* from

multiple angles, considering how the event was described and interpreted by various actors – national media, regional officials, cultural workers, and inhabitants of virtual space – and how these various actors used Soviet and other repertoires to advance their points of view. These various angles permit a focused discussion of legacies, legacy theater, and usable pasts: the form and content of the call, and media responses to it, illuminate different ways social and political actors reproduced aspects of the Soviet past in the present.

Without access to the intentions of social and political actors, it is not possible to untangle all the pathways by which characteristics of past institutions appear in the present. However, this chapter does introduce two important distinctions: between continuities that represent persistence (legacies) from performances of the past that advance distinctly contemporary aims (legacy theater); and between efforts to stage elements of the past (legacy theater) and uses of language and practices associated with the past to comment on the present (usable pasts).

The following text begins with a brief discussion that places *pokazukha* in broader global and historical contexts, following with an account of the episode at the center of this text. The following section examines elements of the episode that seem to resonate with Soviet-era practices and considers whether we can conclusively identify them as “legacies.” Next, this chapter discusses the role of legacy theater in the context of specific historical repertoires involved in the production of this iteration of *pokazukha*.³ This section analyzes the nested set of state-orchestrated illusions that together constitute the episode, what those illusions were meant to conceal, and why what looks “Soviet” may not always be so. The final section examines usable pasts in the context of Russian print commentary and radio broadcasts about the episode. The conclusion considers the role of laughter and derision in evocations of the Soviet past, addresses what Vladimir Putin’s administration may have been up to in the production of the *pokazukha* at the center of this chapter, and returns to some of the epistemological and methodological implications of studying how, today, the Soviet Union is with us.

Pokazukha

Pokazukha, a Russian term that approximates “window dressing,” denotes performances or displays, often state-sponsored, that are just for show and meant to create positive impressions of economic or political development.⁴ *Pokazukha* is endemic in contemporary Russian politics and is widely understood as a social fact; to use the language borrowed by anthropology from psychoanalysis, *pokazukha* is an experience-near concept – one that has salience for the people whose politics are the object of discussion (Geertz 1974). Even more than other façade institutions, *pokazukha* is theater. With it, all of the Russian Federation’s a stage: state actors recruit ordinary people as players, and elaborate productions are rehearsed and then executed. Actors

and audience alike often are aware that what they are doing and seeing is a performance.⁵

Some elements of *pokazukha* have clear roots in the Soviet past – even as others are reminiscent of earlier practices. Presentations of model farms, factory production lines, schools, stores, and many other institutions were staples of Soviet-era performances for delegations from Moscow and foreign audiences alike. The form of the practice was the presentation of successful results. Among the purposes of the practice were to disguise flawed results, attract resources and praise, and deflect punishment from the center. The concept was officially acknowledged as well as practiced: *pokazukha*, while itself critical to the maintenance of Soviet power, was also used in official language to critique (supposed) ideological opponents: some performances of *pokazukha* were cast as efforts to conceal less than full participation in state projects.

Much popular discourse about contemporary Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union explicitly or implicitly conceptualizes phenomena such as *pokazukha* as Soviet residue, or what Ken Jowitt (1992) called Leninist legacies, here resurrected by Vladimir Putin in his reassertion of a long historical tradition of Russian authoritarianism. Other approaches see *pokazukha* and related practices as part of an even longer tradition in the political culture of the region – a tradition that has been present in Russia not only during the Soviet and imperial periods (Seifrid 2001), but even as far back as fifteenth-century Muscovy (Kollman 1987).

However, while contemporary *pokazukha* shares some features with Soviet-era and earlier forms in Russia, it also shares characteristics of related practices elsewhere in the world. Similar ideas have other names in other contexts: contemporary *pokazukha* is not a phenomenon specific to post-Soviet space, or even to postsocialism. In Lusophone Africa and Brazil, people speak of laws that exist “só para inglês ver” – “just for the English to see,” in reference to nineteenth-century pro forma Portuguese efforts to stamp out the slave trade in the face of British criticism. In the Arab world, people refer to *dimuqratiyya shakliyya* (formal democracy) and *al wajiha al dimuqratiyya* (the democratic façade). In Emmanuel Terray’s (1986) work on Côte d’Ivoire, he introduces a similar duality in the politics of *la véranda* and *le climatiseur*. And in the United States, we have Astroturf lobbyists who pay PR firms to create campaigns that resemble grassroots political movements – as well as a powerful “populist” political movement with origins and financial backing from American oligarchs (Mayer 2010).

The existence of similar practices in imperial and pre-Petrine Russia, as well as the presence of related phenomena elsewhere, suggests that claims of cultural particularity, or of Soviet residue, may require reexamination: we need to be careful about understanding or explaining present developments in terms that take for granted continuities with the past and the durability of institutions or culture. This is of particular importance in this case: unlike other aspects of Soviet-era political and social life that seemed to disappear for years and then

resurface during the Putin era, the concept of *pokazukha* remained more or less present (if not uniformly prevalent) in official and media speech during the 1990s.⁶ However, its appearance in different periods is not in itself *prima facie* evidence of continuity: morphological similarity does not mean that today's and yesterday's façades or imitations are, to use the language of evolutionary biology, homologous structures, or structures with a common origin.

Rather than attempting to establish elusive genealogical links between contemporary and past political behavior, this chapter offers two, alternative optics that allow us to analyze different ways people use the past. Today's *pokazukha* involves a mix of persistence, evocation and reference, ironic recycling, and instrumental use. None of these categories can be said to stand entirely apart from one another. This chapter does not seek to demonstrate all of the ways examples of legacy theater and usable pasts are interrelated. Rather, it uses these concepts to analyze the form, content, and purpose of elements of Soviet experience that are present in contemporary politics. In the following section, we begin to examine an episode that offers an opportunity to draw such distinctions.

Vladimir Vladimirovich and the Doctor from Ivanovo

In mid-December 2010, the prime minister of the Russian Federation held one of his regular television call-in shows, in which citizens from all over Russia could phone the studio to ask questions – a practice he had begun years before as president of the Federation. This time, something unusual happened: a young cardiology intern from the town of Ivanovo called Vladimir Putin live on air and told a truth instantly recognized across the country:

"Vladimir Vladimirovich," he said, "in November you were in our town on a working visit. You were evaluating the development of health care in the region. So, I think to date there has never been such a *pokazukha* in our town. Hospitals quickly were prepared for your visit, and a lot of equipment was temporarily brought into the regional hospital for your visit and brought out afterwards." The doctor went on to say that employees had been given fake slips that showed their salaries were more than twice what they were in reality, and that hospital workers had even been recruited to dress up as patients and lie in hospital beds as the prime minister's entourage passed through the wing.⁷

As the doctor spoke, the moderator for the studio audience, Maria Sittel' – a newscaster on state television familiar to all Russian viewers – grew visibly uncomfortable. When he finished speaking, the studio audience broke into applause, prompting the apparently nonplussed Putin to ask, "I don't understand what you're applauding – the artfulness of the local leader or the physician's courage." The young people on whom the camera trained at that moment responded in unison, "the courage." Putin then responded at length to the question and assured the audience that the matter would be investigated.⁸

In the aftermath of the call, Russian media space was filled with discussion of the cardiologist's phone call to Putin. In the days that followed, it became a subject of heated debates as well as jokes on television shows, radio debates, blogosphere commentary, Twitter, YouTube, and so on. Everywhere one turned in Russian media and virtual space, the phone call was the focus of discussion.

The response of the Ivanovskaia regional administration, as reported in the "Ivanovo blogosphere,"⁹ was swift: local politicians immediately questioned the veracity and reliability of the doctor's narrative, and television and newspapers dissected the elements of his story to identify factual errors or find any way to discredit him. The speaker of the regional assembly, Sergei Pakhomov, suggested that "competent organs" should deal with the doctor (Lenta.ru 2010). The doctor was called to the local prosecutor's office, and rumors flew on television and in print media that he would be fired. The head doctor of the Ivanovo regional hospital called the phone call a "provocation" (Karmazin 2010).

Several days afterward, the doctor received a call that the prime minister's press secretary later confirmed to have come from the prime minister himself. In it, Putin reportedly offered the doctor his protection (Sazonov 2010): "We won't leave you in the lurch. We'll help you, we know the whole situation. Don't worry" (Petrov 2010). Some ultimately came to see the episode as a public relations coup for Putin, who in the end came across as a sympathetic character supporting an honest doctor who had dared to tell on dishonest local bureaucrats.

This was not the first time such an event had occurred, in which an ordinary person publicly voiced a broad social complaint to Vladimir Putin and in so doing, received his sympathy – and a redirection of responsibility toward mid-level professionals or bureaucrats. At a February 2008 press conference, a female university student who appeared to be either extremely nervous or under the influence of a controlled substance asked Putin about stipends for students, noting that, "students have to work, and that affects how we study. So we work, we earn money, we give [money] to teachers – those are the kinds of specialists we produce." The student's frank recognition of bribes to educators – a widely known and discussed social phenomenon related to low teachers' salaries – was met with joking dry complicity on the part of the president: "What are you saying about the teachers?" to which the audience responded with laughter.¹⁰

We might think that such moments of truth telling, like the Ukrainian sign language broadcaster who broke with the script of a 2004 newscast to sign that the reported results of a presidential election were "lies," thus helping to unleash what came to be known as the Orange Revolution (see Boustany 2005), could have acted as a catalyst to bring people into the streets of the Russian Federation. Instead, official media and virtual space alike responded with furious but short-lived debates. The following sections discuss those

debates, consider “Soviet” elements of this iteration of *pokazukha*, and show how legacy theater and usable pasts help to interpret this episode and the debates it provoked.

Soviet Legacies? Interpreting the Doctor’s Crimes

Before examining ways political actors consciously draw on past repertoires and participate in the reproduction of past practices and institutions, it makes sense to consider what we mean by “legacies” in this context and whether and how we are able to positively identify them. First, in the absence of open acknowledgment of political strategies and tactics, how can we distinguish palimpsests from legacy theater? An example from Putin-era politics crystallizes the epistemological and methodological challenge of differentiating persistence from deliberate performance: the “Brezhnevization” of the Putin government.

To the extent that political and social actors choose Soviet vocabularies to communicate meaning in this and other episodes in the present, those vocabularies have tended to date from a particular period in Soviet history. Arguably, what we see in Putin-era Russia are not resurrections of the entire Soviet period generally, but of Brezhnev-era ways of thinking and talking. In 2011, this connection came to dominate public discourse when Vladimir Putin’s press secretary, Dmitrii Peskov, commented on the usefulness of the Brezhnev period in a widely discussed television interview.¹¹

Many agree on striking similarities between the political leadership of that time and contemporary Russian politics, including the prevalence of imitations in politics.¹² In a 2010 performance, Mikhail Zadornov, wearing a Pioneer neckerchief “to put everyone in a good mood,” made reference to parallels between the Brezhnev and Putin eras:

I’ll suggest the next sentence in a whisper, because otherwise they’ll cut it out, but such that only he who can hear it will hear it. In a whisper: they say that the stenographers of the United Russia congress did a little hack work – they took the material from the twenty-fifth congress of the CPSU and simply changed the last names where necessary. They’ll kick me out of the Pioneers after that phrase. (Zadornov 2011)

Despite evident similarities between the two periods, what is not as clear is to what extent people evoke the 1960s and 1970s primarily because governance in the contemporary period happens to remind people of those days, and to what extent politicians do so because they wish to improve perceptions of contemporary realities by association, evoking the nostalgia some people feel for that period (Pelevin 1999; Boym 2001, 1995; Yurchak 2005). In other words, is this broadly agreed upon resemblance a case of persistence, or a performance of elements of that period for political gain?

Second, how do we establish genealogical relationships between practices, when first, they are separated by two or more decades and second, they are not unique to the period or region under study? Several aspects of the situation

described in the doctor’s phone call to Vladimir Vladimirovich, as well as certain elements of the reaction to it, appear recognizably “Soviet.” Most obviously, the liturgy in which hospital staff participated – “local physicians awaiting the *vozhd*” (Karmazin 2010) – appeared to draw on Soviet repertoires of political behavior, performances of economic development having been the stock in trade of Soviet-era delegations’ visits to enterprises of any sort. However, that resemblance demonstrates nothing more than a perception of resonance. To illustrate this analytical problem, here we consider another aspect of the episode, namely, the furious response of Ivanovo bureaucrats in the aftermath of the call.

After the episode, the doctor wondered publicly about what had caused such reaction from members of the regional administration: “I didn’t reveal any horrible secrets. I simply described a *pokazukha* that constantly is going on here and there. Everyone admits to me: they say, well, we know about that, it’s common knowledge. So why did the functionaries react so sharply to those words?” (Sazonov 2010). The young doctor was not alone in the view that he “didn’t reveal any secrets.” When the hosts of a radio show asked callers about a milder version of the phenomena the doctor had described – namely, whether they adjust figures or reports for their bosses’ sake when evaluators come – the response from one Muscovite was rapid: “It’s an absurd question. It’s everywhere in our country” (Radio Maiak 2010).

If the doctor was simply stating what everyone already knew, what explains the reaction to his phone call – on the part of both the regional authorities, who panicked, and the rest of the country, which followed the story with great interest? Here, Soviet norms of communication may help us understand why and how certain parties responded the way they did. In Yurchak’s interpretation, in Soviet discourse pragmatic categories of meaning tended to matter to participants more than semantic ones: Yurchak writes of unanimous voting at Komsomol meetings, “to participants this was usually an act of recognition of how one must behave in a given ritualistic context in order to reproduce one’s status as a social actor rather than as an act conveying ‘literal’ meaning” (2003, 486). In this example, as in many other instances of Soviet-era unanimous voting, the content of the proposition at hand was not what was significant. Rather, it was the fact of participating in an expression of unanimity that held meaning.

In the case of the call-in show, the young doctor declined to follow the normal “rules of the game.” From this perspective, it was not the content of his critique that mattered so much as his decision to break a particular social rule.¹³ The significance of the information lay in its public verbalization, not its content: the challenge to authority in the doctor’s phone call, and the reason for the furor it caused, lay not in the situation he described, but in his decision to describe it.

In other words, calling a *pokazukha* by its name was a direct challenge to the regional administration not because the information revealed was particularly

surprising to anyone, but because in so doing, the doctor challenged a means by which the state expresses its power. The truth is beside the point; it was participation in the ritual that was expected. When Ivanovo hospital staff writing anonymously noted that, "All kinds of big cheeses from the local administration have come to the regional hospital and are deciding how to remove the stain of shame" (Karmazin 2010), the shame in question was not the pretense. Rather, here shame arguably lay in the poverty of a health care system compelled to put on a show for visitors from Moscow or in local authorities' seeming inability to control a particular employee.

The apparent persistence of both a Soviet-era discursive convention and underlying patterns of social and political expectations, brought into relief by the reactions that the doctor's call provoked, would seem to suggest a relationship, perhaps even a direct line of descent, between late Soviet practices of communication and interpretations of the doctor's phone call. However, such an inference is complicated by the existence of similar practices in other places and times: to the extent that such practices are present across national contexts, there may be other reasons why they happen to arise in contemporary politics. Lisa Wedeen offers a useful parallel in the context of Syrian politics. As she has argued in the case of the al-Asad cult, the performance of ritual itself constituted state power. She writes, "the idea being reproduced in the specific practice of uttering patently spurious statements or tired slogans is not the one expressly articulated – Asad is in no meaningful literal sense the 'premier pharmacist.' Rather, Asad is powerful because his regime can compel people to say the ridiculous and to avow the absurd" (1999, 12). There, as in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, some people may participate in a political charade by acting "as if" they supported a regime, and the fact of participation may supersede whatever people may privately think or say about that charade (Wedeen 1998).

Further, without a reliable way to observe directly and trace the reproduction of discursive norms – and without systematic consideration of the various other influences that may contribute to the production of norms that appear to echo Soviet-era ones – it may be difficult in this case to demonstrate the presence of "legacy" with any degree of either precision or accuracy.¹⁴ *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc* arguments are not helpful for conclusively identifying the complex ways people may, deliberately or unconsciously, reproduce past practices. We can, however, begin to consider the ways actors in contemporary politics may manipulate, draw on, and perform elements of the Soviet past.

Legacy Theater: A Pokazukha Matrioshka

What had happened during the prime minister's visit to Ivanovo? We know from the doctor's phone call that regional authorities in Ivanovo sought to present an image of economic progress in the health sector to the prime minister and his entourage. Having received specially allocated funds for regional

development, they hoped to show – or at least believed they were expected to show – that hospital staff members were well paid, certain wings of the hospital were well equipped, and patients were cooperative and appreciative of the care they were receiving. Additionally, as others later reported, they hoped to show that roads were freshly covered with asphalt, hospital buildings had roofs that protected patients from rain, and infrastructure in the city was well cared for. Implicit in Khrenov's account was the notion that funds for regional development had not made their way to their intended destinations.

What was the actual material state of affairs in the health care system in Ivanovo at the time? Notwithstanding the performance that had been staged for the Moscow delegation, conditions at the regional hospital where the *pokazukha* occurred were far better than in other health care facilities in the region. In investigating the call-in incident, *Komsomol'skaia pravda* reported on conditions in the first municipal hospital in Ivanovo. That facility is housed in a pre-revolutionary former stable, in which rooms are arranged shotgun style: "you open a door – and you end up in the dressing room, next – the toilet, behind it, the hall. That is, the toilet is a walk through" (Suprycheva 2010, 10). The journalist went on to describe some of the conditions there:

The walls are chipped and flaking. Enterprising patients paste wallpaper on them at the level of their beds, so that pieces of plaster don't fall on their heads. Besides, they stick them with improvised means – pieces of sticking plaster. It's a picturesque scene, particularly in combination with the black moss on the ceiling – it's impossible to remove it, since the ceilings are four meters high. But the most interesting thing happens here starting at 8 o'clock in the morning. From departments that are not connected with each other by corridors – they're isolated – they bring through the sheets and mattresses for disinfection. (Suprycheva 2010, 10)

After the phone call to Putin, local newspapers were bombarded with letters from people anxious about the quality and accessibility of health care in the region. A journalist for *Argumenty i fakty* wondered at the phenomenon: "It's true that, surprisingly, before ... [the] speech it turns out that no one noticed the ruin. And he, the young specialist, having announced it to the whole country, is now being made to offer his apologies at length" (Boiarkina 2011, 40).

According to the prime minister, the regional hospital in Ivanovo had received 130 million rubles from the federal budget. Such an influx of cash represented a special privilege, not only for the region, but also for the hospital itself. Most hospitals in the region were struggling with multiple challenges, including huge shortages of qualified personnel – in one hospital, only half of all shifts were staffed, and almost half of all staff worked double shifts (Smol'iakova and Gritsiuk 2010, 1). Most often, this left patients' families to care for and feed loved ones, as well as to take turns mopping hospital floors. Further, amidst gross infrastructural decay, there were limited resources for paying hospital staff – if the national minimum monthly salary was 4,300

rubles, nurses in Ivanovo were being paid 2,660 rubles, and doctors' starting salaries were 3,560 rubles (Suprycheva 2010, 10).

In an interview after the incident, the doctor explained his actions by saying that people were afraid and that he had simply "voiced the mood in the city." What were people afraid of? In his view, unemployment, layoffs, economic distress (Alalykin 2010). He sought to call attention to two things: the low pay of health care workers and the political behavior required by their precarious economic positions. The participation of hospital staff in the show for the Moscow delegation had been, in all likelihood, motivated by concerns about their personal economic situations.¹⁵

It may be the case that such performances, which may remind people of Soviet-era practices – and Soviet-era fears of the state – inspire a climate of social anxiety, and that politicians stand to gain something from that anxiety. However, in this case Soviet morphology conceals a logic rooted not in a fear of political violence (which might be said to have played a role in some, though not all, Soviet iterations of *pokazukha*), but rather of economic vulnerability – vulnerability in a system in which social welfare provisions have been all but entirely eroded, and in which the social contract underlying the final decades of Soviet citizens' participation has been broken.

The hospital was not the only theatrical space in this episode. As became apparent later, the preparations for Vladimir Putin's visit to the Ivanovo regional hospital were only one of two iterations of *pokazukha* that were part of the doctor's call. *Pokazukha* was a basic mechanism of communication not only in the events described in the doctor's phone call, but also in the organization and presentation of the televised phone call itself. As media commentary on the event later revealed, both the hospital visit and the phone call itself were examples of *pokazukha*: the phone call itself was, in certain respects, staged. Further, the orchestration of the entire episode appears to have been meant to provide an illusion of openness and responsiveness on the part of the Putin government.

What had happened during the show? The organizers of the show ensured that from the audience's perspective, it appeared that the doctor's phone call had been both serendipitous and anonymous. During the show, toll-free telephone numbers and addresses for text messages were announced and flashed across the screen, giving the impression that a lucky caller could reach the premier simply by dialing or texting. During the call, Sittel' simply identified the caller as "a cardiologist from Ivanovo": he did not introduce himself, and the premier noted that he hadn't caught the caller's name.

It emerged later that, suggestions to the contrary by members of the Ivanovo regional government and some national media notwithstanding, the cardiologist from Ivanovo was a real person, he had a name, and he was known to the show organizers in advance. His name was Ivan Khrenov (that his last name happens to carry obscene connotations in Russian slang could not have been

lost on the public, and was not lost on those who subsequently sought to use derision as a political tool to discredit the young doctor). In media investigations of Khrenov, it further came to light that the young doctor had not himself dialed the call center. Rather, as he explained in a televised interview, after receiving his parents' blessing, he had submitted a letter in advance to the prime minister. That letter was chosen from among about 2 million others to perhaps be presented to Putin: several days before the show, a technician had come, presumably to verify that his phone line was working properly (Khrenov wondered if the technician had been from the FSB); during the show, the television studio had called him.

That Khrenov had managed to get through to Vladimir Putin and ask such a question thus was no accident, but rather part of the theater: "everyone accepts the rules of the game, and even the truth-lover Khrenov has no way of leaping across the barrier if not for a higher will" (Petrovskaya 2010, 8). The staging of the phone call about the staging of the hospital visit thus differed in important respects from the *pokazukha* in Ivanovo: the phone call revealed an economic reality – things are not as rosy as they may have appeared – even as the illusion of the phone call concealed a political one – ordinary people cannot, in fact, simply get through to the prime minister's line with a confrontational question.

Note that not only Soviet, but also imperial repertoires were present in the overall narrative that emerged in the week following the performance. As Khrenov's story unfolded, it came increasingly to resemble a central trope in imperial history, in which the benevolent tsar is insulated from knowledge of what troubles the country by selfish boyars – played here by today's power-hungry bureaucrats, or *chinovniki*. Khrenov's letter to Putin follows the form of an appeal to the autocrat; the author presumes that the information contained therein is unknown to the leader and suggests confidence that he will take action, once he is informed. Finally, in this narrative, trouble comes from the regional authorities, not from the tsar himself. Putin, by contrast, is meant to be Khrenov's protector. Even Khrenov's mother reproduced this trope: "If they're really going to drive him out, of course he'll appeal to Putin. Maybe he'll go to Moscow" (Lenta.ru 2010).

Upon closer examination, Khrenov's phone call appears to be part of a broader strategy on the part of the Putin government: to present a façade of what Matthews and Nemtsova call a "highly controlled version of liberalization from above that will include more freedom of expression, a friendlier face toward the West, and inviting former liberal critics to act as Kremlin advisers. He and his advisers hope that allowing a degree of free speech and creating the appearance of responsive government will keep voters happy" (2010; also see Whitmore 2010). As a journalist for *Izvestiia* noted at the end of 2010, that year had seen "a new genre of links between the people and the authorities – the voice 'from Potemkin villages,'" noting further Moscow's Center for

Political Technologies Alexei Makarkin's description of the government's uses for the phenomenon – as a rather “vivid method of communication between the authorities and society. You know, rather than discussing this or another theme, you can take a concrete story ... a concrete Doctor Khrenov unmasks falsifiers and those who would varnish the truth” (Beluza 2010, 2012). Elements of illusion present in the televised call to the premier concealed other aspects of contemporary political realities and suggest different aspects of the complex relationships between contemporary politics and their Soviet progenitors. Here, the staged disruption of a Soviet politico-theatrical form was the vehicle for the idea that contemporary Russian politics are democratic, and that the government is responsive to citizens' concerns.

Like other pressure valves currently permitted in Russian media and virtual space, such performances themselves together thus partake in a third, broader *pokazukha*: in this instance, Khrenov called to report on a performance that was Soviet in form but that expressed the anxieties of a neoliberal economic present, in the context of a performance of responsiveness meant to reassure the Russian public of the liberal politics of an increasingly authoritarian regime. Here, paradoxically, performances of the past are not Soviet continuities as such, but props that support an impression of just enough freedom of expression to ensure continued support for the Putin government.

Usable Pasts: Murzilki Salute Pioneer Ivan

If the televised *pokazukha* provides an illustration of legacy theater, public reception of the event on radio demonstrates how the concept of “usable pasts” may be useful for understanding other “Soviet” elements of this episode. In the days that followed Khrenov's phone call, parody was an important tool for political and social actors commenting on the episode, as they deliberately chose and performed elements of Soviet culture to achieve particular ends – in this case, to discredit the young cardiologist.

A few days after the call, a popular musical parody and morning show on a nationally syndicated radio station made Khrenov the subject of a song. The show was *Murzilki International*, named for a children's literature and art magazine published throughout most of the Soviet period and into the present day. The song drew explicitly on numerous musical, gestural, and verbal tropes associated with the Soviet past as they described, contextualized, and commented on Khrenov's action.

Here, Soviet tropes were used not to create an illusion of historical continuity, but to ridicule the young doctor. The Soviet past furnished tools with which to critique the present: the Murzilki parody used children's vocabularies of the late Soviet period to mock and discredit Ivan Khrenov – and, by association, everyone who had appreciated the content of his phone call to Putin. The parody began with a pioneer salute: “dress to Khrenov, the country's [Young] Pioneer! (*ravniais' na Khrenova, pionir strany!*)”¹⁶ The tone of the

song is facetious: the refrain hails the doctor as honest and brave and observes how quickly he achieved fame:

Khrenov the cardiologist! F#@%ing cardiologist!
 You're honest and courageous, and young!
 Khrenov the cardiologist! F#@%ing cardiologist!
 The path to the heights of glory was not long,
 Cardiologist Khrenov! Cardiologist Khrenov!
 He called! He informed! He reported the facts!
 Cardiologist Khrenov! Cardiologist Khrenov!
 On TV! On the radio! Became known to everyone!
 (Lomovoi 2011)

The critique embedded in this musical rendition of the doctor's truth telling carried serious overtones. In this interpretation, Khrenov is not a brave individualist but a friend of power.¹⁷ Here was an accusation of collaboration, using Soviet-era language associated with informers: *nastuchal, fakty soobshchal*. Khrenov's critique is cast as an appeal from within the system, using the language of the system – not an attempt to overturn it. The Soviet police state provides the language with which to level such an accusation.

At the same time, in the context of the parody's particular musical accompaniment, Khrenov's zeal appears naïve and idealistic: the verse was set to the music of a Soviet-era children's song about multiplication tables, *Dvazhdy dva – chetyre* (“Two times two is four”).¹⁸ Even more than an informant, Khrenov is a tattletale:

All around they divide the budgets,
 Divide!
 There's nothing you can do,
 Do!
 But to whom can an honest mind tell about it?
 How, to whom? To Putin!
 How, to whom? To Putin!
 That's absolutely right!

(Lomovoi 2011)

Through its sarcasm, the message here was that resistance is useless; telling the truth only made the speaker look naïve and foolish. Normal behavior meant participating in the charade.

Other comments about the phone call followed a similar pattern, drawing on Soviet tropes to critique Khrenov's action – expressing not so much solidarity with the local functionaries who directed the *pokazukha* in Ivanovo, but rather dissatisfaction with Khrenov's seemingly having broken ranks. In particular, the idea that Khrenov was enacting a Soviet heroic children's trope in the service of a political regime could be found elsewhere in media space. Writing in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, Elena Suprycheva dryly observed, “The glory of Pavlik Morozov has been eclipsed. A new hero is on the stage: a cardiologist,

that same guy who gave up, wholesale, all of the functionaries of his native Ivanovo" (2010, 10). Here, Khrenov is portrayed as taking up a central role in an enactment of a Soviet morality tale: the son who turns on (and in) his father to maintain his fidelity to the values of the communist state.

The use of the Pavlik Morozov trope is curious; in Khrenov's case, his loyalty appears to lie with the people around him who are struggling to make ends meet, rather than with an ideology promulgated by the state. However, Suprycheva's "clever boy" (*soobrazitel'nyi mal'chik*) Khrenov is the object of derision not because he challenges the performance of the central state, but because he is viewed as complicit in it. In other words, if regional authorities publicly smeared Khrenov after the phone call, calling the young doctor psychologically unstable (*nevmeniaemyi*), parts of the national media moved to discredit him with implicit accusations of "acting Soviet" – specifically, being a good communist. Khrenov's own words likewise may have contributed to this perception: in his televised interview, he tried to legitimize one of his arguments by making reference to a statement by Stalin (Alalykin 2010).

Such critiques, while using Soviet characters and vocabularies of morality to make a point, approached the Soviet past as a disparate set of tools with which to comment on the present. Amidst a wide variety of possible shared social metaphors that could have been used to interpret the situation, and given the eclectic and sometimes contradictory character of the references people used to comment on it, critiques of Khrenov's actions may be said not to reflect mere reproduction of Soviet discourse, but rather deliberate, and ironic, recycling. In these examples, the Soviet period functions not so much as a constraint framing present action as a reservoir of usable pasts.

Conclusion

After the call-in show, state-owned media moved to manage perceptions of the entire episode. The morning after Khrenov's phone call to Putin, Radio *Maiak*, one of the five radio stations held by the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, held a call-in show to discuss the phenomenon of *pokazukha* in contemporary Russian society (Radio *Maiak* 2010). The program began with laughter and a series of jokes about the doctor's last name, followed by a summary of the episode and a question to listeners about their participation in *pokazukha*. The atmosphere was of carnival in Bakhtin's sense – only the apparent aim, or at least result, of the performance seemed to be to normalize the interventions of the imitating state.

Callers to the show spoke openly about a variety of different episodes of *pokazukha*, at times describing their own roles, and at others enumerating various outrageous and hilarious tactics employed by other people in their entourage or city: ground painted green to simulate grass¹⁹; road repair paid for but undone (a staple of budgetary misdirection nearly everywhere); and a host of other diversions. A private businessman who said he had been personally

involved in preparations for the visit to Ivanovo of the man to whom he referred on air as "our respected [leader]" recounted how a child had hung around the work crew, curious about what they were doing. When the child started to get in the way, irritating the crew, the foreman had joked, "Don't touch the child! He's probably an officer of the FSB."

The episode on *Maiak* included a great deal of laughter – primarily laughter at descriptions of various iterations of *pokazukha*. What was the meaning of that laughter? Soviet traditions of subversion – and post-Soviet nostalgia for such subversion²⁰ – might suggest social critique and a virtual circle of intimates created in the audience through the program. However, another meaning, one consistent with the tone of other re-descriptions of Khrenov's action, also emerges.

First, in successfully encouraging others to share tales of *pokazukha* on the airwaves, the program hosts managed to dilute one aspect of the doctor's phone call to Putin: here, others also were talking openly about political secrets on the airwaves. The discussion was not part of a wave of protest that, in another national context, might have followed an event such as Khrenov's phone call. Rather, it served to render banal the seemingly extraordinary event of the evening before: How brave was the doctor, really, if others could talk about the same things, publicly?

Second, it normalized and underlined widespread complicity in such performances as the Ivanovo *pokazukha*. The message seemed to be that we are all in on this together: participation meant neither false consciousness nor, precisely, an expression of the fragmented self or double consciousness.²¹ Rather, participation in *pokazukha* expressed a version of ideological fantasy, an inversion of Marxist false consciousness: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it."²² Khrenov emerges from the episode as a *chudak*, an eccentric – an oddity for having come forward.

Further, to the extent that Soviet tropes are present in the discussions of Khrenov's phone call, they are used to criticize him for his supposed ideological enthusiasm. Ultimately, if all of the parts of this episode are taken together, we see that performances of and references to Soviet repertoires serve primarily to discredit persons (here, Khrenov) associated with them, to normalize both administrative incompetence and participation in the political theater that conceals it, and to cast Putin in a positive light. In the end, state and media management of the event produce a complex narrative with complicated relationships to the Soviet era: here, the Soviet Union is very much with us, but there is no direct line connecting the past and present, nor any single valence attached to the various elements of the Soviet past that make their appearance in this multilayered episode of political theater.

This chapter has identified different ways political actors encounter, articulate, and use historical residue. I have here sought to go beyond the rubric of "legacies" because without conceptual refinement, we take certain analytical risks. Those risks include, first, misreading contemporary politics through lenses

that may exaggerate the importance of the past in determining the present. To whatever degree certain elements of the past remain relevant today, whether in administrative practices, infrastructure, or other ways, historical repertoires are not the only tools of which contemporary actors avail themselves. As we see in the case of Khrenov's letter and phone call, complaints articulated using language and forms associated with the past often reflect concerns about contemporary political and economic arrangements. Second, without considering the role of legacy theater and usable pasts, we are unable to account for historical consciousness or agency on the part of political actors. This seems risky indeed, for in such a case, the past becomes the sole actor, and we are left with a vision of historical destiny that leaves little room for the possibility of contingency, irony, or the solidary change prompted by movements of individual citizens (Rorty 1989) – a vision that would constitute a more precise recapitulation of some Soviet ontologies than any of the Leninist residue that may be present in contemporary Russian politics.

Notes

- 1 "Historical legacy" and "legacy" often are used interchangeably. This chapter will use the term "legacy" rather than the pleonasm "historical legacy."
- 2 The use of a "usable past" here thus contrasts with other approaches to conscious cultural recycling, such as the idea of "restorative nostalgia" elaborated by Boym (2001) or the complex forms described by Oushakine (2007).
- 3 *Pokazukha* and "legacy theater" both denote performances. However, they have different functions in this analysis: *pokazukha* is a category of practice, whereas legacy theater is a category of analysis. On distinctions between the two, see Brubaker and Cooper (2000).
- 4 G. A. Solganik provides the following definition: "Pokazukha, -i (f). Neg. Anything affected; activities calculated for an outward effect, in order to create a favorable impression" (2008, 488).
- 5 *Pokazukha* was widely discussed in 2010. See, for example, a December episode of Roman Gerasimov's Channel 5 program *Otkrytaia studiia*, entitled "Pokazukha." In introducing the program, Gerasimov notes, "You can agree, this phenomenon is commonplace for our country, dammit, we know that before every visit of the higher authorities they lay fresh asphalt and one could make a list of all that they do, sometimes they steal, oops, I mean they paint the grass (*inogda kradut ... fu, travu krasiat*). All that is outrageous and unfortunately it's become a tradition." Video at <http://rutube.ru/track/3914531.html?v=68c136a55b5027036f646a18fef63dof>. Accessed June 10, 2013.
- 6 An Eastview search for January 1992–December 1999 finds 603 matches.
- 7 "The nurses were ordered to say that their salary is twelve thousand [rubles per month], and doctors were given receipts for the sum of thirty thousand, which is not true. Several of the sick were dispersed [*razognali*] and hospital workers in hospital gowns were put there [in their beds]. My understanding is that this is how the situation was presented to you: everything is going according to plan; the money is being used. What can you say about this?" Video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr9RX_qnwFA&feature=grec_index. Accessed June 10, 2013.

- 8 That night's show was long, lasting four and a half hours. The moderator seated with Putin opened the program by characterizing the Russian Federation as "in crisis." In the course of the program, Putin was asked questions not only about the state of the economy, health care, and other social matters, but also about riots in Moscow, ethnic tension, and violence. In a question framed by a query about his dogs, one woman asked him about Khodorkovsky's most recent trial. Video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um4PgVZG3xg>. Accessed June 10, 2013. The doctor's call came later, during a relative lull in the program, in the context of a discussion of health care in the Russian Federation. During his call, a medical team from Cheboksary appeared on the television screen.
- 9 This interesting spatial locution comes from Karmazin (2010).
- 10 The video of this episode, entitled "Putin i obkurennaiia devushka" ("Putin and the stoned girl"), has been watched more than 6.6 million times on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLCrAmQEUDk&feature=related>. Accessed June 10, 2013.
- 11 See, for example, "Peskov: rassuzhdaiushchie o brezhnevizatsii Putina nichego ne znaiut o genseke, on byl pliusom dlia strany," 2011. *Gazeta.Ru*, October 4. http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/10/04/n_2037898.shtml#p2. Accessed June 10, 2013.
- 12 On the Brezhnev era, see a joke cited in Krylova that catalogs characteristics of various periods in Soviet history: "in Brezhnev's time, they would have started rocking the train and announcing train stations in order to create the illusion of movement" (1999, 252).
- 13 On the "rules of the game" in post-Soviet Russia, see Ledeneva (2006).
- 14 Further complicating interpretation of the episode as a Soviet legacy, some commentary on the Ivanov *pokazukha* situated the performance not in Soviet traditions, but in contemporary global technologies. Imitating a style of writing popularized in the postmodern fantasies of Viktor Pelevin, an article in *Izvestiia* evoked Tatarsky, the protagonist of Pelevin's *Generation "P"*, describing television as the "main emperor and *pokazushnik* of our days, running from real life like the devil from incense, and inspirationally creating a parallel reality, where handmade scandals become simply the engine of advertisement and where, in the final analysis, everyone gets along with everyone" (Petrovskaya 2010, 8). Here, the performance and references to it are understood as part of the massive PR constructions that, together with commercial interests, constitute contemporary politics. See Wilson (2005).
- 15 For an explication of some of the underlying motivations driving participation in similar political rituals in post-Soviet space, see Allina-Pisano (2010).
- 16 "Ravniais" is a military drill command that in this usage has no precise equivalent in Western contexts (where soldiers may be asked to "dress right" on parade, for example, but not to dress to a specific person, as here). Here, the radio audience is being asked, facetiously, to look toward or align themselves with Khrenov, who is portrayed as exemplifying good Pioneer behavior.
- 17 This impression deepens in the third stanza of the parody, in which Putin "arranges" those who are dishonest.
- 18 In one rendition of the song, which was written by M. Pliatskovskii and V. Shainskii, Eduard Khill leads members of Bolshoi Detskii Khora in a staged classroom performance. Video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5DPEg1p3s>. Accessed June 10, 2013.

- 19 Also see Lacey (2011) on similar practices in suburban Arizona.
- 20 As well as for, as Krylova puts it, "the lost position of the Soviet subject," for whom the workings of power were understood (1999, 249).
- 21 As many authors writing on forms of marginality and totalitarian societies suggest. Wedeen advances a version of the argument that Bakhtin and others suggest in Eastern European contexts. Ellison (1952) and DuBois (1997) describe a related phenomenon in American life.
- 22 As Žižek notes, following Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1989, 33).

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