

***The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia.* By Serguei Alex. Oushakine. Series, *Culture and Society after Socialism*, eds. Bruce Grant and Nancy Ries. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009. 299 pp. Bibliographical references. Index. Photographs. Paper.**

Maria Sidorkina Rives, Yale University

Serguei Oushakine's book is an intricate analysis of several ways of creating, narrating, and practicing community in 1990s Barnaul, the administrative center of the Altai region (a Russian province in south-western Siberia). The period during which the author conducted his fieldwork (2001-2003) followed a time described by Russians with terms such as *bespredel* (lawlessness or normlessness) and *likhie devianostye* (the rowdy 1990s). Relying on this periodization provides Oushakine a temporal limen around which to frame his discussion of a prior state of a non-fragmented "social fabric," or Soviet "socialist order," which used to provide a set of consistent "guidelines and roadmaps" for interaction (pp. 2, 132); a "transition" or "period of radical changes" which provoked Russian "people-in-passage" to make sense of things using "new languages and skills" that relied heavily on "the trope of loss" (pp. 2, 4); and finally, "new forms of collectivity," "belonging," and "connectedness" (pp. 4, 5, 11). The orientation to the framework of "post-Soviet liminality" links the book's discussion with theories of dramatic change in the political, economic, and social orders, and with anthropological studies of how ordinary people in Russia made sense of the impact of the transformation from socialism on their everyday lives (p. 260).

The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a short conclusion. Each chapter focuses on a particular community in Barnaul and its practices of belonging within the post-Soviet "social order" (p. 51). Oushakine's informants, include, in his words, "Russian veterans of the Chechen wars, mothers whose sons were lost in the army, national Bolsheviks, regional politicians, local sociologists, and politically active youth" (p. 11). Each of the four chapters engages one aspect of transformation (capitalism, ethnicity, state, and memory) and makes sense of it using a cluster of social, political and psychoanalytic theorists (p. 13). Connections between chapters are made by means of several concepts discussed in the introduction, such as the role of trauma, "communities of loss," "the patriotism of despair," and "the work of the negative."

Chapter 1, "Repatriating Capitalism," engages with "neocommunist" organizers and participants making sense of post-Soviet economic transformations (p. 28). It is based on interviews with members of several political and religious groups in Barnaul, and on texts written or read by these groups' members. The chapter reveals a "discursive disenfranchisement" of those who were unable or unwilling to join in 1990s' public valuations of monetized exchanges, liberal ideology, and Russia's place in the global circulation of capital. People's

rejections of dominant interpretive genres lead to the alternative “forms of knowledge” provided by conspiracy theories and interpretive practices that fixated on grief for lost cultural values. Chapter 2, “The Russian Tragedy,” focuses on the use of the trope of tragedy by a range of nationalist texts narrating Russia’s recent history, written by Moscow scholars or the author’s Barnaul informants. Oushakine explores the fascinating connections between the “symbolic strategy” of representing this history in ethnic terms, and the intellectual tradition of “*etnos*” theory, shaped most prominently by Yulian Bromley and Lev Gumilev during the Soviet period.

Chapter 3, “Exchange of Sacrifices” is based mostly on interviews with veterans of the Chechen wars and war-related materials collected in Barnaul. For Oushakine, this group’s interpretive approach reveals “what happens to strong state-oriented identities when the state suddenly removes its legal, economic, and symbolic support” (p. 132). The absence of frameworks for interpreting the war in Chechnya lead soldiers to mechanically cast it in Soviet-style symbols; enact identities based on the performative aspects of military discipline, songs, or public rituals; and evoke social recognition through metaphors of exchange (which Oushakine terms an “exchange of sacrifices,” following Georg Simmel) (pp. 191, 138). Chapter 4, “Mothers, Objects, and Relations” relies on interviews with a group of activists associated with the Altai Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, observation of conscripts and their parents, documents such as mothers’ letters from the archive of the Museum of Local Wars, as well as video footage of memorial and funeral rituals organized by the mothers. The chapter details how support networks, narratives, and public representations were created by the mothers through practices centered on enactments of grief and pain. Oushakine demonstrates how affective practices and their public and private representations were enabled by the material production and circulation of objects such as monuments and photo albums. The chapter also contains some vivid illustrations of personal experiences of the USSR’s collapse, such as an instance of a mother not being able to recover her son’s body from Estonia in 1993, when there was no communication between Russia and Estonia.

To close the book, Oushakine quotes Victor Shklovsky’s description of St. Petersburg after the Bolshevik Revolution. The quote makes vivid people’s reliance on mere performative functioning after all structures (internal to the body/to the nation-state) have been exploded. A body, which had its insides blown up, sits in a group with other bodies, talking instead of screaming in dumb pain. Oushakine draws a connection between this scenario and his informants’ will to persistently find ways of making sense together, often out of the mere shells of resources that are the remnants of the former cultural order (such as state privilege systems for veterans, ways of narrating history that are homologous with Marxist hermeneutics of suspicion, and Russian funeral practices). The diverse communities of loss represented in this book, Oushakine claims, are united by practices of framing their members’ relations “in naturalizing terms,” using “a vocabulary of shared pain,” and forging bonds through “the solidarity of grief,” among other strategies (p. 262). Oushakine concludes by noting that “there is, of course, not that much new about this type of belonging in Russia” (*ibid.*). But what precisely *is* new about the

strategies used by people to deal with uniquely post-Soviet liminality, and what is “nothing new,” in that it is predicated on historically reliable genres and logics of connectedness?

Oushakine’s study treats much fascinating material produced by social groups usually seen as occupying the symbolic fringes of main-stream Russian intellectual life. The author engages with books such as *Why Russia is not America*, and newspapers such as *Generation*, much like those that habitually frown from the shelves of regional bookstands. These are materials traditionally dismissed by academic Slavists as ‘bad art,’ or ‘bad journalism,’ picked up only to be analyzed as symptoms of a phenomenon one cannot engage with on its own terms. Oushakine’s nuanced anthropological reading of these materials is valuable in itself. Together with the thematic scope and theoretical richness of the book, this approach makes his study an insightful and provoking addition to regional scholarship, and any graduate or upper-level undergraduate course on how people in Russia assembled a sense of belonging after the end of the Soviet Union.