

FASCISM AS *STIOB*

Mischa Gabowitsch

## analysis

*'Stiob differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humour. It required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person or idea at which this stiob was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule or a peculiar mixture of the two.'* (Alexei Yurchak)

Fascism is no laughing matter: it is the purest expression of evil, the negation of humanity, the darkest chapter in twentieth-century history. It is a constant threat that needs to be repelled and contained, a disease that creeps up on those whose political and intellectual immunity is weakest, spreading through society unless radical countermeasures are taken and its carriers are purged. Political puppet masters and manipulative intellectuals vying for control over hapless minds are always seeking new ways to make fascism acceptable in order to advance their devious goals. Fascism, like antifascism, is a deadly serious affair.

Or so the story goes.

## ANTIFASCIST EARNEST

A narrative of fascism was constitutive of Soviet political identity since at least the Great Patriotic War. Officially, fascism was, according to Georgi Dimitrov's hallowed formula, 'the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, chauvinist and imperialist elements of finance capital'. More practically, however, fascism was an epithet hurled at whomever the Soviet authorities happened to designate as the worst ideological foe of the USSR and its international interests: at one time or another, Josip Broz Tito, the U.S. government, West German 'revisionists', Israel, the Greek junta and the Pinochet dictatorship were all defined as 'fascist.' This designation was by no means random or empty of meaning: it implied an extreme degree of political hostility and placed the 'fascists' in the continuity of the Soviet Union's worst enemy ever, the 'German fascist invaders'. Fascism was defined through its relationship with the Soviet Union, rather than as an abstract set of political characteristics: this

explains why Mussolini's Italy, for example, was hardly ever mentioned in discussions of fascism. From the 1960s at the latest, victory against the fascists in the Great Patriotic War became a more important linchpin of Soviet national unity than even the October Revolution – with good reason, perhaps, given the toll it had taken on virtually every part of Soviet society.

Political rituals that appealed to fascism as the ultimate evil were among the most formal occasions of communal life in the Soviet Union, no more open to irony or light-heartedness than the Pledge of Allegiance or performances of national anthems before athletic events are in other countries. May 9 parades and veterans' school visits adopted a tone of mournful gravitas; commemorative concerts and the TV and radio broadcast known as *A Minute of Silence*, launched in 1965, used the solemn inflections of the legendary wartime radio announcer Yuri Levitan. Anthologies of 'antifascist' texts were published on paper and vinyl and widely available throughout the country. Every pronouncement about fascism was so serious because it was ultimately a statement about one's own country and its identity.

Maya Turovskaya, Yuri Khaniutin, Mikhail Romm, and the other makers of *Obyknovenny fashizm* deserve much of the credit for marshalling this vituperative tone to go beyond ritual rejections of fascism and create a portrait of the National Socialist system that was also intended as a parable of Soviet totalitarianism. Unlike most straightforward propaganda products of the time, their documentary sometimes adopts an ironic tone, for example when it confronts Nazi phrenology with footage of Nazi leaders. Yet this irony is always

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rooted in a sense of moral clarity: it is a weapon against something that is unmistakably dangerous and undeniably serious, even though it may be exposed to ridicule. In this, *Obyknovenny fascism*, like other parables of the similarities between fascism and communism, were part and parcel of Soviet political culture. The peculiar style of anti-fascist critique that they created came to inform the liberal intelligentsia's responses to the radical Russian nationalist groups that began to appear on the public stage in 1987. These groups were to be ridiculed for the paucity and backwardness of their ideology, yet feared as a serious political threat. Every anti-Semitic pronouncement, every implicit or explicit reference to the National Socialist program, every display of a swastika needed to be taken at face value, as a statement of political intent and a realistic threat that could get out of control unless it was resisted. Foreign political scientists often spoke the same language: politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskii and authors such as Eduard Limonov and Alexander Dugin were seen as representing a fascist threat due to the strength of ideological and stylistic borrowings from German National Socialism.

(ANTI)FASCIST *Stiob*

Yet the very solemnity of Soviet antifascism, and its centrality to the country's political identity also led to the emergence of a different kind of irony about fascism, one that is perhaps best described as *stiob*. An ambiguous mixture of ironic detachment and complete identification, *stiob* has been called one of the defining characteristics of late Soviet and post-Soviet culture. For this reason, we chose the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's description of this widespread kind of ironic attitude toward official Soviet discourse to introduce the article.

*Stiob* was not simply provocation, escapism or a manifestation of political dissent. To be sure, all of these had made use of the language of fascism

in Soviet times. Ever since the 1930s, small groups of teenagers had repeatedly 'played Fascists' by donning SS uniforms or wearing other symbols associated with National Socialism. In most cases, these were not taken very seriously even by the authorities; in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, when groups of 'neofascists' started celebrating Adolf Hitler's birthday, this led to a moral panic and attempts by students at Moscow State University to 'go bash the fash.' Fascist symbols also proved attractive to more highbrow groups. In the 1970s, for example, a tiny occultist circle that called itself the Black SS Order sprung up around the Moscow poet Evgenii Golovin. Much has been made of such isolated occurrences, which are sometimes seen as precursors or even explanations of the more widespread post-Soviet fascination with fascist symbols and ideologies. Yet structurally, these were not much different from other expressions of frustration with the limitations of life in the Soviet Union, many of which resorted to symbols and cultural artefacts that had been declared pernicious by official culture: rock music, religious practices or certain styles of clothing. This is not to say that practitioners of this 'Soviet fascism' were not sometimes earnest in their beliefs, but it does mean that their actions were mostly symbolic – and that is precisely why those who knew of such activities were often so outraged.

*Stiob* was different. It was both more ambiguous and much more widespread. Indeed, one of the most important targets and sources of *stiob* was also one of the most successful products of Soviet culture: the TV miniseries *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. First broadcast in 1973, it is the story of Soviet spy Maxim Isayev aka Max Otto von Stierlitz, who infiltrates the Nazi leadership toward the end of World War II and facilitates the Soviet victory. Based on a spy novel by Iulian Semenov and loosely inspired by a similarly themed Polish film, it instantly became the most watched Soviet

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TV production of all times, a status that it has preserved through countless reruns. Backed up by varying amounts of evidence, the series has been described as an attempt to glorify the role of the secret services at a time when their social prestige was waning, or as a projection of the workings of Soviet bureaucracy onto the leaders of Nazi Germany. Whatever the makers' intentions, the narrator's solemn timbre and the film's many incongruities made Stierlitz and the other characters the butts of numerous jokes that mockingly adopted the same serious tone as the series itself. Yet derision does not go very far in explaining the popularity of Stierlitz and his adversaries. In the Soviet Union, even the satirical genres, such as political cartoons, were not just a way to laugh about

something that was already intimately known and despised, but also an important source of information. This was all the more true of depictions that aspired to be taken seriously. For all its inconsistencies and invitations to parody, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* structured the late Soviet imagination with respect to fascism with greater force than the well-known ideological stereotypes or the extremely sparse historical literature that was available to

most citizens. Here were Russian actors at their most striking and persuasive, wearing Nazi uniforms and producing, supposedly, a detailed reflection of life in 'Fascist' Germany. The actors' complete identification with ostensible masters of evil

was mirrored by the viewers' readiness to inhabit this aesthetic even as they were making fun of it. By taking the solemnity of Soviet representations of fascism to their extreme, the series invited viewers to identify with its basic worldview, while at the same time they perceived it as an obvious expression of the incongruities of official Soviet culture. Approaching Stierlitz through *stiob* allowed Soviet citizens to appeal with a wink to a supposed shared knowledge that Soviet anti-fascism was a sham without requiring them to propose an

The Forbidden Drummers (*Zapreshchennye barabanshchiki*)

'They Killed a Negro'

A dead snake does not hiss  
 A dead goldfinch does not sing  
 A dead Negro does not go to play basketball  
 Only a dead Negro does not go to play basketball  
 Ay-ya-ya-yai! They killed a Negro, killed a Negro. They killed.  
 Ay-ya-ya-yai! They whacked him for no reason, the bastards.

His hands folded on his belly  
 He hasn't eaten or drunk for three days  
 The Negro lies and does not go to dance to Hip-Hop  
 Only a dead Negro does not go to dance to Hip-Hop  
 Ay-ya-ya-yai! They killed a Negro, killed a Negro. They killed.  
 Ay-ya-ya-yai! They whacked him for no reason, the bastards.

And Mum is now alone  
 Mum has gone to a Magician  
 He beats a tom-tom and Billy stood up and walked  
 Even a dead Negro heard the tom-tom and walked  
 It didn't matter that he is a zombie, he stood up and walked  
 Even zombies can, can play basketball.

From the Russian by C.G.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSNZSfwtoKE>

explicit alternative.

POST-SOVIET *STIOB*

The peculiar association between the culture of *stiob* and representations of fascism helps explain many peculiar aspects of the debate about fascism and radical nationalism in the post-Soviet era. Indeed, much of this debate has focused on the question of whether certain political or cultural figures are *really* fascist,

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and earnest antifascists have usually attempted to answer that question by trying to uncover these figures' real intentions through an analysis of their programmatic or other statements. Most prominently, Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party is known for its attempts to blend left-wing and right-wing radicalism to create a generalised aesthetic of protest, as exemplified by their flag, a Nazi banner where the swastika has been replaced with a hammer and sickle. Is the NBP *really* a right-wing party that seeks to infiltrate the left and make radical nationalist ideology acceptable? Or is it *really* a left-wing organisation that marshals right-wing imagery for its provocative potential? In 1999, the rock band *Zapreshchennye barabanshchiki*, which was close to the NBP, caused a stir with its hit song 'They Killed a Negro,' forcing band members to stress their non-racist intentions, albeit in ambiguous ways. Was it *really* a racist or an antiracist song, and is studying the band members' pronouncements the best way to find out?

Many well-known cultural figures in post-Soviet Russia have at one time or another participated in the creation of artistic 'projects' in which they appeared as 'fascists' or in some way utilised the symbols of fascism. Egor Letov, one of the founding figures of Russian punk rock, was among the first members of the National Bolshevik Party. The experimental composer Sergei Kurekhin, who also allegedly joined the party shortly before his death, praised fascism as a source of cultural inventiveness. The NBP's party newspaper, 'Limonka', published countless articles and images that drew on the potential to shock inherent in the symbols of fascism. Some such projects, especially those of visual artists, were closer to the provocative end of the spectrum: in 1996, Anatoli Osmolovskii collaborated with a number of Trotskyist political activists on a collective exhibition entitled *Antifascism and Anti-Antifascism* that purported to reveal the inconsistencies of left-wing opposition to fas-

cism; in 1998 and again in 2006, the Moscow-based Blue Noses group created a series of photographs entitled *Fucking Fascism*, which portrayed naked people taking various poses that involved ropes, bananas and drawings of swastikas. Others relied on greater degrees of identification with the supposed object of critique. What they all have in common is that they do not see 'fascism' simply as the political ideology that antifascism struggles to oppose and contain, but as something else: a political style, a cultural phenomenon, a straw man or an example of political kitsch.

What all these projects have in common is that their purported critical thrust, such as it is, is opaque and ambiguous at best. Additional context is needed to decode it: hence the endless debates about their authors' 'real intentions' and the need to state these intentions publicly, in a language that reduces their ambiguity and connects them back to a more clear-cut political language of right and wrong. Artists and political activists who 'use fascism' in this way, as well as those writing in their defence, are constantly forced to respond to critics who accuse them of being 'genuine fascists,' and they usually do so by accusing these critics of stupidity, lack of irony and imagination, and ignorance of the 'real' context in which these works are created. Those shocked by the National Bolshevik's platform, they might argue, fail to realise that it is an artistic statement rather than a political programme to be taken seriously; they are duped by the more authentic fascist system of the Russian state into thinking that the NBP poses a greater threat than the government's repressive apparatus. This need to add layers of justification and explanation goes to the very heart of *stioab*: in order to be successful, *stioab* needs to identify with its object to the point of becoming indistinguishable from it. By doing so, however, the practitioner of *stioab* relinquishes any control over his perception by others. The risk of seeing one's intentions misunderstood is implicit to the success of a *stioab*

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project; indeed, by relying on an implicit shared understanding, *stiob* does not even require one to come down on one side of the divide between critique and sympathy. Some challenges to the obsolete Soviet dichotomy of fascism and antifascism may be meant as genuine attempts to find new ways to counter totalitarian ideology; yet other, ostensibly similar critiques may serve to rehabilitate it. ‘Who are the enemies of the current commissars?’, writes Vladimir Popov, leader of a violent ultranationalist splinter group, in a pamphlet published anonymously in 2005. ‘Their enemies are all those normal people who are fed up with playing “internationalists”, “patriots”, and “antifascists” as in Soviet times’.

Those who view *stiob*-style ‘fascists’ as mere manipulators who masterfully use artifice and ambiguity to make fascist ideas acceptable among various hip cultural scenes are missing the point; but so are those who see them as champions of tongue-in-cheek transgression, misunderstood only by those who lack intelligence and wit. After all, the National Bolshevik Party, often touted as an artistic and provocative project, became Russia’s biggest non-state-sponsored youth movement, attracting straightforward ultranationalists in addition to a medley of *artistes provocateurs* and leftist intellectuals. While this may recall the success of fake news programs such as the *Daily Show* in the United States, which

now competes with mainstream news broadcasts, the NBP’s brand of *stiob* fascism has remained considerably more ambiguous even after the party leader, Limonov, switched to a largely non-nationalist rhetoric centred on human rights. A particularly striking attempt to draw on this ambiguity is a glossy booklet entitled *Glamorous Fascism* published by *Evropa*, the publishing house directed by Vladimir Putin’s

erstwhile political spin doctor Gleb Pavlovskii. Using countless quotes and illustrations from the NBP and other opposition activists, left and right, the brochure attempts to portray these figures as straightforward



Antifascism and Anti-antifascism: Catalogue Title from the Exhibition in the Centre for Contemporary Art (CSI), Moscow, October 1996, Curator – Anatolii Osmolovsky; on the left, the participating artists, on the right, the organisations involved.

proponents of fascism bent on duping young people by giving a ‘glossy’ image to their ideology. The foreword to the publication is signed by Vasili Iakemenko, then the leader of the *Nashi* youth movement, which is itself often accused of being a fascist organisation.

CULTURE INSTEAD OF POLITICS

An ambiguous aesthetic attitude toward fascism is of course not uniquely Russian. It does, however, seem to be primarily a post-socialist phenomenon. Antifascism was much more central to the political identities of many East European states than to those of any other countries, with the partial exception of Italy; and the decay and dissolution of socialism provided a powerful invitation to challenge accepted

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boundaries. The art collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, founded in 1984, drew on 'fascist' symbols to create the trappings of a mock 'state.' In 2000, the Polish-American artist Piotr Uklański staged an exhibition entitled 'The Nazis' that featured pictures of famous actors in Nazi uniforms. The Polish actor Daniel Olbrychski – one of the faces on display – entered the gallery with a sabre and slashed some of the pictures in protest, prompting the Polish Minister of Culture to close the exhibition, and Uklański's defenders to accuse Olbrychski and the minister of 'failing to understand.'

The main reason *stiob* and the attendant ambiguities are perpetuated and do not fade into insignificance is that the Russian political system makes it very difficult to express political dissent or social critique in straightforward, politically constructive ways, through party competition and public debate. Not unlike Soviet times, culture must make up for the restrictions on political life. By that very token, standards of evaluation become blurred. Should every utterance about politics be judged by straightforwardly political criteria as a call for action, or do

some statements need to be evaluated as ironic over-identification with an object that is otherwise immune to critique? And who is to decide? As long as the space of sincere political debate remains restricted, subtle ambiguity will continue to be an attractive response, and fascism will remain – among other things – an object of *stiob*. That is a pity, because the preoccupation with *stiob*, its debunking and its effects diverts attention from problems that may or may not have anything to do with 'fascism,' however defined, such as the murders of dark-skinned people in the streets of major Russian cities – problems that are indeed no laughing matter.

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## READING SUGGESTION:

Alexei Yurchak: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

## THE SWASTIKA AND US: QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

Maya Turovskaya

## witness

As one of the people who had the original idea and wrote the script for the documentary film *Obyknovennyi fashizm* (*Ordinary Fascism*) by Mikhail Romm, I spent one and a half years watching Goebbels's film archive with other members of the research group. This required about three and a half thousand hours to view roughly two million metres of film. It is a scar that time does not heal.

In the early 1970s, the director Tatyana Lioznova and Yulian Semenov, an author of spy novels, *Semnadtsat Mgnovenii Vesny* ('Seventeen Moments of Spring'), created the first Soviet TV series about the last days of the Third Reich

starring the Soviet spy Stierlitz. Although serials now flood the post-Soviet small screen, none of their characters is the equal of Stierlitz as played by Vyacheslav Tikhonov. Highbrows might look down on him, as they did on his colleague James Bond, but, like Bond, everyone knows him: he has become a household name.

## STIERLITZ ENTERS WITH BELLS AND WHISTLES

In 2009, *Seventeen Moments* exploded onto the channel 'Rossiya' like a bomb. For the film's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the film had not only been restored, but also colourised; its critics named it the 'Painted