From Metropole to the PEN Centre

By Galina Sidorova

Translated by Arch Tait

March 2017
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1 ‘A wolf cannot break with tradition
and the she-wolf her sightless cubs nags:
with her milk we imbibe one condition,
‘Never run past the hunter’s red flags!’


The Metropole affair of 1979 made a special contribution to the struggle for the anti-censorship Article 29 of the Russian Constitution, which the current regime has gone to great lengths to reduce to the status of a stage prop. The recent scandal at the Russian PEN Centre over the expulsion from its ranks of Sergey Parkhomenko, the ‘administrative conclusions’ drawn about certain turbulent writers and the voluntary resignation of others, have shown the 1979 affair in a new light. The persecutor in the PEN scandal is Yevgeny Popov, president of the PEN Centre, and himself a hero of events that took place almost forty years ago, in which it was he who was persecuted. The example of Popov seems to turn the Metropole affair on its head and to illustrate just how easily and imperceptibly ‘keeping politics out of art’ can lead to betrayal of the very ideals for which someone fought and suffered. Or is it all simply a matter of the blandishments of power which, in certain circumstances and at certain times, become irresistible?

So what kind of conspiracy was this that in 1979 took place in full public view? A mutiny on the ship of Soviet culture? The coming out of non-official literature? Who was the winner in that match against Sofia Vlasievna (i.e., the Soviet regime), and where will playing games with Putia Vlasievna, her direct descendant, lead?

‘A Chunk of Literature’

It is a quiet Saturday morning. We walk beside Yevgeny Popov through the celebrated Oak Hall of Countess Olsufieva’s mansion, which in 1934 became the Writers Club and is today the Central Writers Club. The expensive parquet squeaks beneath our feet, and from the ceiling an enormous glittering crystal chandelier depends: the very one presented by Stalin to his ‘beloved writers’ as a housewarming gift. Popov and I stop at the foot of the elegant staircase, constructed without a single nail, which leads to the first floor where, in 1979, the office of Felix Kuznetsov, first secretary of the Moscow writers’ association, was located.

The ‘chunk of literature’ that Vasiliy Aksyonov had asked two of his doughty young fellow-compilers of the anthology, Viktor Yerofeyev and Yevgeny Popov, to deliver to the lion’s lair on that memorable January day in 1979, was weighty. A masterpiece of design by Boris Messerer and David Borovsky, it was covered with marbled paper, stitched with silk ribbon (or, according to a different account, bootlaces), and on each of its large sheets of high-quality wove paper four pages of clean copy author’s texts were pasted. Messerer’s stylized gramophones on the frontispiece seemed to be shouting out the underlying concept: ‘Give us freedom to create! Down with censorship!’ Kuznetsov, who had been expecting a pile of typewritten samizdat, was speechless.

There were twenty-five of them, with a supportive twenty-sixth, the American writer John Updike, a friend of Aksyonov, who contributed an excerpt from his novel The Coup, which was in press. The list of authors in Metropole’s table of contents is sufficient for the reader in 2017 to recognize the ‘modest grandeur’ of the enterprise.

By 1978, thoughts of publishing an uncensored magazine had firmly taken root among the literary Young Turks breathing down the necks of their more senior comrades. Viktor Yerofeyev put the idea to Aksyonov as the two of them were sitting at the dentist’s, waiting for their anaesthetic to take effect: why not bring out an uncensored magazine, not in some location abroad but right here in Moscow? Even before the anaesthesia had worked, Aksyonov had taken up the idea. That evening he developed it with Popov, a homeless native of Krasnoyarsk to whom he had given refuge in the apartment of his late mother, Yevgenia Ginzburg. This ‘auspicious’ apartment, which consisted of one room and a kitchen, became the forcing ground of Metropole.

The compilers’ tactic was to bring together already established writers like Aksyonov, Voznesensky, Iskander and Bitov who were members of the Writers Union, and others who did not have official recognition. The result was a volume that included Bella Akhmadulina, who contributed as a prose writer with Many Dogs and One Dog, a short story dedicated to Aksyonov. Vladimir Vysotsky, chansonnier and national treasure, who enjoyed a degree of popular acclaim many established writers would have given their eye teeth for, was first published as a poet in Metropole. Fridrikh Gorenstein, whom many of his colleagues considered a genius, was well known as Andrey Tarkovsky’s scriptwriter and as a co-author, and in many cases the sole author, of film scripts; his name did not always figure in the credits. Before contributing to Metropole he had been able to publish officially only one short story, ‘The House with a Turret’, in 1964 in Yunost’ magazine. Semyon Lipkin had hitherto been published only as a translator. Inna Lisnyanskaya had been systematically turned down by publishing houses. Boris Vakhtin was able to publish only as a sinologist and had no prospect of getting his prose or essays published. This was true also of Vasiliy Rakitin, a historian of avant-garde art. Genrikh Sapgir slipped under the official radar as a children’s poet and cartoon animator but was unable to get his ‘grown-up’ writing into print. Yuz Aleshkovsky was also only able to publish novellas and short stories for children. His prose and poetry for adults, in which he had carved out a special niche with his prison camp writing (including the famous ditty, ‘Oh, Comrade Stalin, you are such a scholar,’ which became a part of folk culture), remained firmly out of sight.

That ‘darling of destiny’, as many of his peers thought of Aksyonov, had in fact experienced the full weight of the delights of Soviet power, almost from birth, when his parents were arrested. At the age of five, clutching his lion cub soft toy, he was literally wrenched from his grandmother’s arms by a woman in a leather coat and sent to a reallocation centre for the children of Enemies of the People. Popov himself had experienced no comparable trauma, but arrived in Moscow from Krasnoyarsk already committed to the vocation of literary dissident. As a sixteen-year-old, he and his fellow school students, inspired by the fresh breeze of de-Stalinization, ‘published’ their own independent magazine, managing to bring out three issues. ‘Our punishment was mild,’ Popov recalls with a laugh: ‘expulsion from the Komsomol, including me, despite my not having been a member then or later’.

Another Metropolite I interviewed is Mark Rozovsky, celebrated theatre director, People’s Actor of the Russian Federation, founder and director of the Theatre at Nikitsky Gate, and in the 1970s,
according to Aksyonov, ‘a footloose man of the theatre’. At the time he was invited to sign up with Metropole he had already had his baptism of fire. As a graduate of the journalism faculty of Moscow State University, he had moved to a job with Yunost’ at the invitation of Valentin Kataev, who put him in charge of ‘Vacuum Cleaner’, the opinion section. More importantly, his first brainchild as a theatre director was Our House, a unique university studio theatre that survived for over ten years. It was shut down by officialdom in December 1969 for what Rozovsky himself describes as ‘anti-Sovietism’.

**The Auspicious Apartment**

Inspired and fun, work went on apace in the one-room apartment on Krasnoarmeyskaya Street, near Airport metro station. There were times, Popov tells us, when as many as thirty people might be crammed in, with someone downing vodka in the kitchen while someone else was reciting what he had written. In the meantime, Metropole volunteer Vladimir Boer, later a Distinguished Artist of the Russian Federation, was placidly numbering sheets of wove paper by sticking on numerals carefully cut out of a calendar.

As you browse through the anthology you are struck by its heterogeneity. ‘We were not designing a monument to ourselves,’ Rozovsky explains. No less striking is the lack of intellectual prescriptiveness: the religious philosopher Viktor Trostnikov, for example, is in there side by side with Leonid Batkin, a historian of culture very remote from religion and accused in the Soviet period of being a ‘propagandist of pure art and formalism’. This diversity gives us a snapshot, not comprehensive, but accurate, of what was brewing in the unofficial cultural life of the USSR in the 1970s. It is difficult to imagine Metropole finding a place on the shelves of a Soviet library.

The plan of the Metropolites was to organize a presentation of the anthology or, as they put it, a preview, with invitations sent to favourably disposed members of the public, including foreign diplomats and journalists. Most importantly, it was to be published officially, without cuts, and in Moscow. This intense activity on Krasnoarmeyskaya Street did, needless to say, not pass unnoticed, and eventually Felix Kuznetsov, as the bellweather of Moscow’s writers, phoned Aksyonov to say he would like to see what was going on, and possibly take part. Aksyonov promised to show him the item when it was finished.

And so, on 17 January 1979, Popov and Yerofeyev took a copy to Countess Olsufiev’s mansion. Another ‘chunk’ was taken, as planned, to the All-Union Copyright Agency (VAAP) and another to the USSR State Committee for Publishing, Printing and the Book Trade.

Their mission accomplished, the writers dallied in the Central Writers Club restaurant and, as they left in the evening, took note of the merry clacking of typewriters. Rumours circulated later that Kuznetsov had summoned ten or so typists who worked through the night to produce almost fifty more copies of the masterpiece. The next day the process began of acquainting the community of Soviet writers with the Metropolites’ work, which a priori was categorized as ideological sabotage both in form and content. The Soviet writers were subdivided into those who were trustworthy and those who were less so. The first were allowed to read the work, while the second were to condemn the ‘contagion’ in statements along the lines of: ‘While I have not actually read this work, I know for a fact...’
In the best traditions of the Party and the Cheka, attempts were made to divide the Metropolites, turning one against the other and the lot of them against Aksyonov. They were carpeted one by one for a ‘heart-to-heart conversation’.

‘Pornography of the Spirit’

On 22 January 1979 at 15.00 hours in Room 8 of the Central Writers Club some fifty people were assembled. The meeting was chaired by Felix Kuznetsov, who had started his career as a hippyish ‘man of the 1960s’. The burden of his lay was an attack on ‘Western intrigues’ and the ‘so-called struggle for human rights’.

When we read the transcript of that meeting today – a document that damns the era – there is an uncanny sensation of topical relevance to the present day, to the kind of thing going on here and now at sundry meetings and on sundry talk shows, which seem to echo mechanically what was happening there and then. The meeting became heated as it became increasingly obvious that the delinquents had no intention of confessing their guilt.

‘When you read this anthology, it seems to be describing a country like Cambodia rather than our own,’ Felix Kuznetsov summed up. He was very proud of the label he devised for the genre: ‘pornography of the spirit’. That, indeed, was the headline under which a report was published hotfoot in the newspaper Moskovsky literatot, together with a collection of ‘reviews’ of the labours of the anthology’s authors. Kuznetsov’s tribunal lasted four hours and the concluding resolution, threatening punitive measures if Metropole were to be published abroad, was passed unanimously.

The biggest surprise, however, for both the persecutors and the persecuted, was yet to come. On 25 January 1979, Carl Proffer, co-founder of the Ardis publishing house, announced on the Voice of America’s programme, ‘In the World of Books’, that he had a copy of Metropole and understood that another had reached Gallimard publishers in France.

How had the anthology reached the West? I asked my American colleague, David Satter, who was then working in Moscow as a Financial Times correspondent and was on friendly terms with many of the Metropolites. David believes the manuscripts went through embassy channels, by diplomatic post. To my surprised observation that this ‘chunk of literature’ seemed considerably too large to fit in a letter, he laughed. ‘Well, the Soviet Union was practically sending tanks through the diplomatic post. The general principle was that they stole our technology and we liberated their literature.’

Yevgeny Popov clarifies that, from the outset, the compilers had no intention that Metropole would be published in the West so soon. It was sent there so that, ‘if anything happened’, it would not be completely lost. ‘One copy,’ Popov says, ‘was taken by Ray Benson, an American diplomat who was an old friend of Aksyonov’s; the other was taken by a Frenchman, Yves Hamant, who today is a well-known Christian theologian; he was a friend of Alexander Men and wrote a book about him. At that time Yves was just a boy, with a very junior rank in the French embassy. He came to my apartment one night. I remember the frost was incredibly severe; Yves had a cold and kept sniffing. He wasn’t tall, and when he saw the anthology he was a bit taken aback. He had evidently been expecting it would be either on microfilm or sheets of A4 paper, but here was this stack of heavy art paper. He stoically put it under his arm, shoved it in the boot of his car and drove off. After that,
I was told, without asking permission from anyone, he simply drove across the frontier as a diplomat.'

**Officialdom Shows Its Face**

When talking of those who took the lead in cracking down on Metropole, Popov particularly emphasizes the role of Soviet writers, ‘in exactly the same way as those who most furiously persecuted the greatest painters were other painters, and those who sought to crush Shostakovich were other composers’. He quotes General Bobkov, then head of the KGB’s Fifth Directorate (whose task was to combat ‘ideological sabotage, dissidents and anti-Soviet elements’. ¬RS). In his book The KGB and the Authorities, Bobkov mentions ‘a bunch of bohemian writers who produced a mediocre anthology’. The KGB’s senior ranks, he says, proposed publishing it in a tiny print run of 1,000 copies, but careerists in the Writers Union, spearheaded by Felix Kuznetsov, blew the whole thing up into a major crisis.

The anthology, despite its unconventional format, was not in violation of any written law, as the lawyer Konstantin Simis pointed out in his article ‘Metropole as a social phenomenon’ in the July 1979 issue of Problems of Communism. What most infuriated the regime was the fact that those rebelling against its unwritten laws were precisely those who, in some sense, it was cosseting.

The cunning ploy of the anthology’s compilers in dissociating themselves from ‘card-carrying dissidents’, earned Metropole harsh criticism from the other, openly anti-Soviet, side. ‘A fat cat ran between us,’ Vladimir Voinovich recalled a few years ago. ‘The compilers hoped to trick the Soviet regime with their apparent loyalty, because none of the writers who had been expelled from the Writers Union and who were considered dissidents ... were invited to join them ... They thought that, by including in their number writers who ... were barely being printed - Vysotsky, Sapgir, Gorenstein and some others - their venture was very daring. I found it conformist.’

Popov acknowledges that the initial reaction among the dissidents was unambiguous: these Muscovite ‘darlings of destiny’ - Aksyonov, Akhmadulina and Bitov - had been spoiled rotten and it had gone to their heads. The discussion of Metropole, hot off the presses, in the Vestnik Russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniya [Herald of the Russian Christian Movement ], which was published in Paris by Nikita Struve, handed down its verdict: the anthology was ‘an immoral imitation of modernism’. ‘As soon as the repression began, however,’ Popov says, ‘everything changed and we were martyrs for democracy.’

Yevgeny Popov and Viktor Yerofeyev were expelled from the Writers Union. More precisely, they never received their membership cards, which the authorities had not got round to issuing them before the Metropole incident. The management did offer them an alternative: they could publicly recant and then, supposedly, would be readmitted. They declined. In protest at the expulsion of their young colleagues, Inna Lisnyanskaya, Semyon Lipkin and Vasilii Aksyonov resigned from the Union. Expulsion made it impossible to get into print with any Soviet publishing house.

In Yerofeyev’s family the sins of the son were visited on the father who, as soon as the scandal broke, was recalled from his post of USSR permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, signalling the end of his diplomatic career. Viktor Trostnikov was expelled from the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineering, where he taught, and until the collapse of the Soviet
Union this well-known mathematician and future philosopher and theologian worked as a watchman, also mastering the professions of manual labourer and bricklayer.

Aleshkovsky, Aksyonov and Gorenstein emigrated. In 1982, threatened with a term in a labour camp for having published abroad, Yury Kublanovsky also felt compelled to emigrate.

**From Kuznetsov to Popov**

For Felix Kuznetsov, the antihero of the *Metropole* saga, who settled very comfortably in the post-Soviet circumstances into the position of director of the Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the ‘*Metropole* Embarrassment’ (as he titled his article in Moskovsky literator of 9 February 1979. – RS) came back to cause him too some embarrassment a couple of decades later. In 1998 Yevgeny Popov chanced to see his sworn enemy on television, leaning on a copy of *Metropole* that had supposedly been lost, and declaring ‘There were difficult times in our country. Take, for example, the *Metropole* anthology. We wanted to help the lads …’ Popov wrote to the offender demanding the return of the anthology, which Kuznetsov had himself admitted he had kept in his personal archive. The offender replied that the conversation on air had so upset him that he had already thrown the copy out with the rubbish. The matter was taken to court in a case that lasted two years. Kuznetsov’s representatives caved in only when threatened with an audit of the institute he headed, in whose archive the anthology was supposed to have been kept.

Popov got the anthology back. Justice did not, however, triumph completely: all trace of the pencil markings left by the persecutors had been meticulously erased.

History, however, likes to spring surprises, and today the extraordinary thing is how quickly, using that same eraser, the iconic image of a Yevgeny Popov who did not bend the knee under pressure from the regime can be rubbed out of the record. How readily he himself has taken to the role of persecutor, expelling those so recently his colleagues from the ranks of the Russian PEN Centre. Whatever became of tolerance of another person’s opinion? Or solidarity with those persecuted by the regime?

The explanation, I believe, may be found in a virtual debate, more precisely an incompatibility between the positions, of two men I interviewed. Both were brothers-in-arms and fellow heroes in the *Metropole* affair. Both are creative individuals who in the past have borne their personal hells with dignity, who have shared a common past, evaluated it, and come to diametrically opposed understandings of the present moment. Perhaps, of course, this reflects the contradictory nature of our here and now.

Below are excerpts from the two interviews.

I say to Yevgeny Popov [YeP – Ed.]:

It seems to me that at the present time more and more only-too-familiar features are re-emerging, like ghosts of constraints you once tried to loosen.

YeP: I don’t think there is a close similarity between the *Metropole* affair and what is going on nowadays. Perhaps I’m a philistine in this respect, but I’m very relieved the authorities
are no longer paying any attention to writers. It has finally come home to the idiots that they should concentrate their attention primarily on propaganda, on television and the press, and on journalists.

GS: They should crack down on journalists, and leave writers in peace?

YeP: I'm no historian. I'm not convinced there is a trend backwards. I think, rather, everything is just overdone. I prefer to avoid extremes, whether of the left or right. I make a point of socializing only with sensible people, and they do not usually have any particular axe to grind. It is a cliche today that, for as long as people can say on the radio that we lack free speech, we don’t! Thank God, they’ve backed off writers, and in general I don’t see how you can compare different periods. There are two different systems: one was totalitarian, and this one is authoritarian. It is one thing when a KGB agent comes to see you, hello and good-bye, and you’re dragged off to Lubyanka. It’s a different situation when certain laws are, at least, observed. For the time being, the rules fall short of outright cannibalism.

I say to Mark Rozovsky:

Perhaps some things were not rooted out properly. We barely had time to enjoy the heady air of freedom during perestroika and in the 1990s before we again find ourselves talking about censorship.

MR: It’s not just a matter of not having rooted things out. We still have one leg stuck in the past. Today is a time of retribution, the revenge of the Communists, of the Bolsheviks. The duplicity of the present era is that one thing is written in the Constitution, but what happens in reality is quite a different matter. I attended a roundtable with Alexander Kalyagin on the topic of censorship. Officials say to us, ‘What are you getting so worked up about? Which theatre has been shut down today? What play has been closed down in Moscow or St. Petersburg? Well, okay, sometimes it happens in the provinces, but even there you can take the case to court. The law is on your side, artists. There it is, set down plainly and clearly in writing: no censorship.’ They go on to elaborate, ‘It is not officials that are banning you, it is public associations that don’t want you, and we have a democracy. Lynch law is part and parcel of democracy. Someone dumps a pig’s head on you, or empties a bucket of urine over you, or comes at you with a hammer, how is that the fault of the state? You artists have to take account of the fact that there are other people and they have other opinions. It’s the state’s job only to keep everything within bounds. That guy who came at you with a hammer was found guilty: he was fined 1,000 rubles.’

GS: So which is more difficult to withstand, direct pressure or this devious kind?

MR: Here we are, sitting in the Theatre at Nikitsky Gate. I have been able to achieve my goal in life. I put on what I want to, I direct it myself. Things are incredibly difficult for me now, but there is no comparison with when I was unemployed, vilified and on blacklists. It could be that things are going to get even worse than they were then. That is another matter. The danger of a return to Stalinism is the most serious threat facing Russia, and it increases every year. For those of us who lived most of our lives under Soviet rule not to recognize
that threat would be a dereliction of duty. I am constantly being told it is time I stopped playing politics: I should create art in its pure form. Well, I can’t change myself, and I don’t believe I’m doing anything that detracts from my art. Yes, this is political art, but The Folly of Being Wise was a political play; The Government Inspector was a political play. Even Uncle Vanya was a political play because it raises the issue of people who could be close to each other becoming enemies, and the whole thing ends with a gunshot. A little over ten years after it was written, the Civil War began. Chekhov appeared to be outside of politics, but see how political he proved to be in the context of history.

So, how political does the Metropole anthology prove to have been in the context of history? I pose that question to one of its fans, someone who can view the issue as an outsider, David Satter.

‘I think the Metropole affair was one of those incidents that shook the system, when people took the first steps towards resistance in literature. In the circumstances in which literature existed at that time, your beliefs mattered. If a result of Metropole was the beginning of a struggle against censorship, that was, of course, a positive outcome, but the problem of half-measures still bedevils Russia today. There is always a danger that those who operate within the official framework will find themselves obliged to adapt, to express half-truths, and then find themselves effectively giving legitimacy to the regime persecuting them.’

**Guardians and Guards**

I think back to that faraway debate when the contributors to Metropole were accused by their colleagues, the fully committed dissidents, of being embedded in the system and playing by its rules. It seems to me that in fact the Metropole team demonstrated, perhaps quite unintentionally, that it is impossible to play with the regime, and especially to flirt with it, whether there are rules or not. No more can you just ‘expand’ the official framework, because if you are really going to push against it from inside, you can only break it.

Mark Rozovsky, in his contribution to the anthology, ‘Theatre ringlets form a spiral’, which today he views with a degree of condescension, wrote, ‘Culture does not need guards, it needs guardians. Guards go on sentry duty: guardians go to the theatre.’ Unfortunately, in Russia today the malign features of those guards on sentry duty, who we might have supposed had long ago marched off into the River Lethe along with that whole era of humiliations and devastating verdicts from kangaroo courts held in lofty Party and Cheka offices, are becoming ever more blatantly visible. They have not been consigned to oblivion. Censorship is supposed no longer to exist, yet the reflexes of persecutors persist and reveal themselves, inexplicably, as the saga of the PEN Centre reveals, even among people one would have expected to shun them instinctively.

In far-off 1979 there was a revolt of culture against censorship, but a revolt by definition takes place with no clear plan, only an upsurge of emotion. There was, however, something else in that episode that has been lost today, something light and elusive: a spirit of free-thinking, the inner freedom and fearlessness of youth which that whole wonderfully talented, heterogeneous collection of people warmed and nurtured in each other. These are qualities that have been murdered in today’s Russian society as it sullenly treks in the wake of Putia Vlasieva, the twenty-first century successor of ‘Soviet Power’. It is a society in which the majority, even among the most creative intellectuals, have never
learned, and show no inclination of wanting, to break free and run beyond the constraints of the regime’s ‘red flags’.
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