

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Ritual Culture of Late Imperial Russia: Performing the Middle Ages

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Slavic Languages and Literatures

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines how the performance of medieval rituals at the tsar's court, in the dramas of modernist playwrights, and in early cinema can be read as commentaries on the sociopolitical situation during the Russian Empire's last two decades. These rituals include the commemorative celebrations at the court of Nikolai II, rites of passage in dramas modeled on medieval mystery plays, the tsar's chronicles, and costume dramas of early filmmakers. My approach examines these three expressions of the medieval aesthetic and their correlations as homologous actions that were symptomatic of the medieval revival during the *fin de siècle*. Ritual thus becomes a way of performing medievalism and hence a constituent part of this phenomenon's development in the Russian Empire. Two national myths, in particular, which this dissertation investigates, emerge through the performance of these medieval rituals: the myths of tsar (authority) and of revolution (rebellion). "Late Imperial Russia" refers to the period of the

last tsar, which lasted from 1894 until his abdication in 1917, with the peak of the medieval revival coinciding with the years preceding World War I, 1894-1914. Assessing these years through political and cultural “performances” of the period allows to present this historical moment as a time of transition that was rife with intimations of social, political, and cultural reforms. Victor Turner’s concept of social drama, together with Richard Schechner’s performance theory, provides a framework for translating these modes of ritualized behavior as aesthetic responses to the sociopolitical conditions of the Russian Empire’s final years.

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## **Note on Transliteration, Translation, and Dates**

I have adhered to the simplified Library of Congress system of transliteration (without diacritics), which is commonly used by American academic publications. All Russian first and last names are transliterated according to the aforementioned system and have not been anglicized (e.g., Lev Tolstoi instead of Leo Tolstoy). If a name appears in an English-language quotation in a different spelling, I have replaced it with the transliterated version for consistency (e.g., “Alexander” is replaced with [Aleksandr]) unless it is a bibliographical reference. If a Russian name is commonly known in its anglicized spelling, I list its English version in parentheses on the first mention only (e.g., Nikolai (Nicholas) II) and retain the spelling for the names of Ukrainian (e.g., Khmel’nitskyi instead of Khmel’nitskii), Polish (e.g., Mniszech instead of Mnishek), German (e.g., Meyerhold instead of Meierkhol’d) and French (e.g., Benois instead of Benua) origins. I substitute the word’s archaic form with a modern version (e.g., “douma” is replaced with [duma]) and transliterate Old Russian orthography according to the contemporary standard (e.g., “moskovskogo” instead of “moskovskago”). Slavic names of fictional characters are anglicized (e.g., Hermann instead of German), and geographical locales retain their anglicized spellings (e.g., Suzdal instead of Suzdal’) unless they appear as a part of the title. The names of places, such as museums, theaters, and monasteries are rendered in spellings that have become conventional in English (e.g., the Ipatiev Monastery instead of Ipat’evskii monastyr’). All translations into English are my own unless otherwise noted. If an English translation is not given accurately or unavailable, texts are quoted in their original language in a footnote. Since my research covers years during which the Julian calendar was the official calendar of the Russian Empire, I have provided both dates, with the Old Style (Julian) first followed by the New Style (Gregorian) second.

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## **Introduction: Medieval Revival as a Phenomenon of Modernism**

### *1. The Russian Empire as Theater*

The coronation of Nikolai (Nicholas) II, which took place on May 14 (26), 1896, in the Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin, was the first in a series of medieval-themed performances of his reign. Although the tsar had legally occupied the throne for over a year-and-a-half by this time, since the death of his father, the ritual of coronation was necessary to assert his monarchical status in the eyes of the Russian Orthodox Church. This was a centuries-old tradition that was first performed when Ivan IV (The Terrible, “Groznyi”) was crowned as the Muscovite tsar in 1547.<sup>1</sup> “For weeks the city has been in gala costume,” reported *The New York Times*. “Venetian masts have been erected in various streets, carpets, tapestries, and bunting have been flung out to the wind, triumphal arches have been erected, and the façades of all the great buildings decorated.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the stage was set for one of the most magnificent spectacles of the decade as Nikolai II readied to make the transition from a state ruler to “God’s Anointed.” *The New York Times* printed a detailed daily itinerary of the planned festivities, which included a triumphal entry to the city; praying at the tombs of ancestors at the Annunciation Cathedral; receiving congratulations from foreign ambassadors, locals, and various religious sects; the transfer of regalia; special religious masses and services; the state dinner; a grand illumination throughout Moscow; the *fête* on the Hodynsky Plain; a pilgrimage to the Troista Monastery; as well as balls, concerts, and a grand review of the troops. The ceremony loosely followed the Byzantine pattern and included authentic regalia of the Middle Ages, such

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<sup>1</sup> The first coronation ceremony took place in 1498, when Ivan III crowned his grandson, Dmitrii Ivanovich, as “Grand Prince” and co-ruler. Groznyi became the first tsar who was crowned as sole ruler and tsar.

<sup>2</sup> “Coronation of the Czar: Great Preparations in Moscow for the Coming Ceremonies,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1896.

as three thrones — for Nikolai II, his wife, and mother — that once belonged to Ivan III and the first two Romanov tsars, the Crown of Monomakh, and attire altered specifically for the occasion’s sacred rite of chrismation.<sup>3</sup> The church’s blessing upon the Russian tsar was mandatory to endorse his divine status before God and his people via the performance of this medieval ritual.

What made the ceremony of Nikolai II’s coronation different from the crowning ceremonies of other European monarchs? What was so unique in the image of Nikolai II holding the scepter and orb from, say, king Edward VII doing the same during his coronation in 1902? Understanding the difference is central to this dissertation’s thesis. This is how one contemporary, a correspondent from *The New York Times* summarizes it: “In Austria, in Germany, in England, a coronation would be much the same sort of performance that it is in Russia, but there a part of the interest, a part of the impressiveness of the spectacle would lie in the very incongruity of it with the circumstances by which it is surrounded.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to explain how the spectators recognize the ceremony as performance as do the political actors involved — whether it is the Russian tsar or the German Kaiser or the British king — all of them are quite aware that they are “playing their parts in a masquerade.” For the king of England, the reporter writes, the ceremony originated in the times when the king still perceived himself as a divine ruler, which altered with the introduction of the Parliament. The Russian and German monarchs, on the other hand, still regard themselves as “the Lord’s anointed.” The difference between the two is that the German Kaiser “cannot get his lieges to share his view,” whereas the Russian tsar, along with millions of his subjects, “accepts his coronation, not as an interesting

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<sup>3</sup> Nikolai II wore the uniform of the Preobrazhenskii Regiment that included a square cutout in the jacket through which he was anointed with oil by the Metropolitan of Moscow.

<sup>4</sup> “The Coronation of the Czar,” in “Foreign Affairs,” *Public Opinion* 23 (June 1896), 714.

historical pageant, but as an important political fact.”<sup>5</sup> Here, in a nutshell, is the difference in perception and, ultimately, in performances. While the reenactment of medieval rituals for the European royalty developed into a tradition that was practiced over centuries, everyone, including the monarch, was always aware that it was only a theater. In the case of the Russian tsar, this theater became inextricably linked with the tsar’s methods of governing his subjects.

The notion of political performances, such as the coronation, being somehow staged and orchestrated is a motif that surfaces often in the perceptions of the country, found in the accounts of westerners. “The Russian Empire is a grand theater where, from every lodge, one can see what goes on backstage,”<sup>6</sup> writes the French aristocrat, Marquis Astolphe de Custine, about his journey through Russia in 1839. His diary is a fascinating, foreigner’s account that presents the country as an exotic and barbaric place. Quite often, the inquisitive observer in Custine engages his audience by enhancing his narrative with metaphors for dramatic purposes: “[The Russian Court] is a theater on whose boards the actors pass their lives in rehearsals,” he writes. “No one knows his part, and [the premiere] never arrives because [the director] is never satisfied”<sup>7</sup>; or “[Russia’s] national characteristics are lost under its borrowed decorations”<sup>8</sup>; or “I came to see a country; I find only a playhouse.”<sup>9</sup> The factual inaccuracies aside, Custine’s travelogue articulates an important, if not dominant, cultural trope of a nation playing a role, which was still true sixty years later, at the cusp of the twentieth century. To be precise, this phenomenon of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 715.

<sup>6</sup> “Cet Empire est une grande salle de comédie où de toutes les loges on voit dans les coulisses.” *La Russie en 1839* (1844).

<sup>7</sup> Astolphe de Custine, *Empire of the Czar: a Journey through Eternal Russia* (New York: Doubleday, 1989): 158.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 324.

reimagining the Middle Ages in the Russian Empire begins much earlier than the *fin de siècle* and even earlier than Custine's visit. Richard Wortman refers to the historical period, which begins with the accession of Aleksandr (Alexander) III in 1881 and ends with the abdication of his son in 1917, as the "revival of Muscovy." During this time, imperial affection for the Middle Ages expresses itself in a number of ways. St. Petersburg's changing skyline is one of the most striking examples, evident in the contrast between the neo-Byzantine style of the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, finished in 1907, and the capital's predominantly neoclassical and Baroque architecture. Medievalism permeates all corners of Russian politics and culture during the final decades of the Romanov dynasty, whereas its purpose, functions, and implications vary over this time period. From Nikolai Rimskii-Korsakov's operas and Igor' Stravinskii's symphonies to a rekindled interest in iconography; from the neo-Slavophile movement to the paintings by Konstantin Makovskii and Viktor Vasnetsov; from the state-sponsored canonizations to the opening of an exhibit devoted exclusively to Russian medieval arts in Moscow during the tercentenary events; from literary mystifications of the Russian symbolist poets to a very real persecution of a Jew during the infamous Beilis Trial of 1913.

This dissertation poses a new thesis: reenactments of medieval rituals in politics and the arts peak during the first decade of the twentieth century and function as a response to the sociopolitical conditions of the period. My work focuses on how medievalism — specifically, medieval performances in court culture, drama, and film — initiates a dialogue with a culture in crisis, and represents one way in which this period is imagined.

## 2. *Recreating the Middle Ages*

“When we say that our age is neomedieval, we have to establish to which notion of the Middle Ages we are referring,”<sup>10</sup> writes Umberto Eco, the Italian author and medievalist, who introduced this term in 1973. His essay credits the twentieth-century mass media with rediscovering the Middle Ages through various forms of archaization. In fact, the concept of *new* medievalism — within the Russian context and specifically as a phenomenon of Russian culture — was first developed by the philosopher and theoretician Nikolai Berdiaev in his work *The New Middle Ages: Reflections on the Destiny of Russia and Europe* [Novoe srednevekov’e: razmyshlenie o sud’be Rossii i Evropy] (1924). “We live in a time analogous to the time of the destruction of the ancient world,”<sup>11</sup> writes Berdiaev. He argues that the Bolshevik Revolution returned Russia to the “dark ages,” but acknowledges that the process of regression to the Middle Ages was already occurring before the revolution. Before discussing *neo-* anything, however, the period of the Middle Ages must first be defined, particularly since the periodization of the Russian Middle Ages differs cardinally from the respective European timeline.<sup>12</sup>

While the inception of the Russian Middle Ages is more or less accepted as coinciding with the Christianization of Kievan Rus’ in 988, the endpoint tends to vary. Contemporary historians like Anton Gorskii regard the formation of a centralized Russian state (the tsardom of Muscovy) during the sixteenth-century, under the rule of Ivan the Terrible, as the end of the medieval period. Edward Keenan’s approach, on the other hand, targets not the boundaries of the

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<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1986), 73.

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev, *Novoe srednevekov’e: razmyshlenie o sud’be Rossii i Evropy* (Moscow: Feniks, 1991), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Eco offers one of the popular timelines for the European Middle Ages that consists of two periods: the first one that runs from the fall of the Roman Empire to 1000 AD and another one that runs from 1000 to Humanism (ca. fifteenth century). Another example is Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011) that identifies the Roman poet’s Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things* [De rerum natura] (ca. mid first century BCE) that was rediscovered by Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 as the work that “swerved” Western history toward modernity.

medieval time as its governing system. He recognizes Muscovy as not an autocracy but an early modern state that harbored three distinct political cultures: that of the court, that of the bureaucracy, and that of the village.<sup>13</sup> The outcome of these practices, Keenan argues, led to the successful collaboration between the tsar and boyars who jointly ruled Muscovy. The level of power and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on a monarch can also be used as one of the defining factors when it comes to identifying the boundaries of the medieval period. “Russia supports, in her medieval church, a superstitious and unprogressive religion, repudiated in form by millions of her uneducated, rejected in substance and outright by most of her subjects who have any claim to culture,”<sup>14</sup> writes Edmund Noble, a nineteenth-century Anglo-American journalist and special correspondent in Russia. “[Russia] is to-day, moreover, as devoid of free political institutions as [Russia] was in the times of Ivan the Terrible,” he continues, “after ages of contact with Europe, [Russia’s] people accept the will of an autocrat, entrenched in the loyalty of the peasants, as the supreme law.”<sup>15</sup> The church under Nikolai II remained an inherently medieval institution. For example, after all property belonging to the Armenian Church in Russia came under the control of the Russian crown in 1903, *St. Petersburg Vedomosti* issued the following statement: “Enormous wealth concentrated in the hands of a church is not only a legacy of the middle ages, but a medieval survival.”<sup>16</sup> As an increasingly powerful institution and bulwark of the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church reached its fullest development since the Middle Ages<sup>17</sup> between 1894 and 1914 while greatly benefiting from Nikolai II’s active role

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<sup>13</sup> Edward L. Keenan, “Muscovite Political Folkways,” *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 156.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Noble, *Russia and the Russians* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1900), 255.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> “Czar Takes Church Property,” in “Religious,” *Public Opinion* 8 (August 1903): 248.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Pol’skii, *The New Martyrs of Russia* (Montreal: Brotherhood of St. Job of Pochaev, 1972), 112.

in its expansion.<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, however, the term “medieval” refers to the age that pre-dates Peter I’s reforms, which westernized the state and, more importantly, stripped the Russian Orthodox Church of its independence and influence. In fact, many examples from court culture, drama, and film focus on reenactments of rituals from the years of Peter I’s father, Aleksei Mikhailovich, from the late seventeenth century.

Brutality, anarchy, fanatical religiosity, and mysticism are among the characteristics associated with the Middle Ages against which subsequent generations of scholars and thinkers reacted. “In [the thirteenth] century men passed from a state of brutal to a state of scholastic ignorance,”<sup>19</sup> writes Voltaire, expressing his disdain for this historical period. One of the central figures of the European Enlightenment, his attitude was shared by other French *pilosophes*. “For [philosophers of Enlightenment] the Middle Ages epitomized the barbaric, priest-ridden, hierarchical world that they were attempting to transform,” writes Robert Bartlett. “They referred to ‘these dark times,’ ‘the centuries of ignorance,’ ‘the uncouth centuries.’”<sup>20</sup> Such a one-sided perception of this historical period was about to change radically only one century later when new generations of artists increasingly turned to the Middle Ages for inspiration. “The term ‘Middle Ages’ may have been invented by the Renaissance humanists,” Bartlett continues, “but the image of the medieval world we have today is a creation of the Romantics of the late

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<sup>18</sup> “The number of churches increased by more than 10,000. There were 57,000 churches by the end of the period. The number of monasteries increased by 250, bringing their total up to 1025. Ancient churches were renovated. The Emperor himself took part in the laying of the first cornerstones and the consecration of many churches. He donated large sums for their construction from his private income. He visited churches and monasteries in all parts of the country, (venerating) their saints. The Emperor stressed the importance of educating the peasant children within the framework of church and parish and, as a result, the number of parish schools grew to 37,000.” (Ibid.)

<sup>19</sup> Voltaire, *The Works of Voltaire*, vol. 29 (New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901), 279.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Medieval Panorama* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001), 12.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”<sup>21</sup> A renewed interest in all things medieval began during the nineteenth century as a reaction to Classicism and Enlightenment. By representing the irrational, mysterious, and unknown, this phenomenon meant something different for the artistic groups that attempted to revive it.<sup>22</sup>

Concerning the chronology of medievalism’s recovery in the West, one must begin with the Gothic revival that commences with Batty Langley’s landscape designs in the gardens of Great Britain during 1740s, the trend that would eventually reach Germany and France. The German group of artists, who became known as the Nazarenes, was founded in 1809 and is considered the first notable example of medieval revival in the nineteenth century. This was also the time of Romanticism, a literary movement, in which medievalism played an important role and represented one of its many definitions. Sir Walter Scott’s historical novels, the British Gothic novel, poetry about the chivalry of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and James Macpherson’s “translation” of the Ossian cycle of poems are among the many prominent examples of medievalism in literature. Founded in 1848 by the group of British artists, the Pre-Raphaelites is another example of medievalism in the arts. Interest in the occult and the supernatural grew with various communities of mystics, such as the Order of German Rosicrucian, the British Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1888), the Theosophical Society (1875), which was founded by Elena Blavatskaia in New York City, Kabbalistic sects, religious cults, Satanic orders, and other esoteric groups. Of course, the reimagined medievalism of these sects differed from the medievalism of Wagner’s musical compositions or the Victorian medievalism of John Ruskin and William Morris. So, too, would the emergence of medievalism

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, *Manufacturing Middle Ages: Entangled History of Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (2013), eds. Patrick J. Gregory and Gábor Klaniczay.

in the Russian Empire at the turn of the century come to mean something different for Russian modernists.

### 3. *Russia's New Tsar*

“Will the Czar recognize the fact that a great nation like Russia cannot be confined within a limited circle of ideas, cannot be cooped up inside a ring-fence of antiquated medievalism?”<sup>23</sup> The reporter from the British *Daily Chronicle* asked this question of the new, twenty-six-year-old monarch several days after the news broke of Aleksandr III's death on October 20 (November 1), 1894. “Antiquated medievalism” is a reference to Aleksandr III's thirteen years of a Byzantine-style of government, which became known as the Age of Counter-Reforms. After assuming the throne, he canceled plans for a constitution, forced liberal ministers to resign, enforced state censorship, and reasserted his status as an absolute autocrat in the Accession Manifesto. The implementation of harsh security measures to fight extremist groups at home was a reaction to the death of his father, Aleksandr II (“Tsar Liberator”) who, despite freeing the serfs and advocating for reforms, still met a gruesome end. “[Aleksandr III] was persuaded by his tutor and adviser, the Procurator of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, that continuing with the liberal reforms would only help to produce more revolutionaries like the ones who had murdered his father,”<sup>24</sup> writes Orlando Figes. During his years as emperor, Aleksandr III stabilized the economy, began construction on the Trans-Siberian railway, and, most importantly, succeeded in keeping the country out of military conflicts, which earned him the moniker of “Peacemaker” (Миротворец). The oppressive measures, however, which resulted in bouts of violence at home, political exiles, imprisonments, persecutions of the Jewish population,

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<sup>23</sup> “The Death of the Czar,” in “The Topics of the Day,” *Public Opinion* 1,729 (November 1894): 573.

<sup>24</sup> Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (London: New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 41.

famines in the early 1890s, and the harsh policy of Russification that called for all ethnic groups of the Empire to learn Russian, were also part of his legacy. The untimely death at the age of forty-nine of this physical giant, who was called “the barbarian” by the German Kaiser, “The Prisoner Tsar” by political activists, “The Peasant Tsar” by himself, and “The Northern Colossus” by others, may have been the greatest tragedy of his reign because it left the country in the hands of an incompetent heir.

“What am I going to do?” Nikolai II’s brother-in-law, Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich (Sandro), recalled the despair of a young man who suddenly inherited the largest empire in the world. “I am not prepared to be a Czar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers.”<sup>25</sup> With the eyes of the world upon him, Nikolai II could no longer remain a reluctant observer. Not much was known about this new tsar, which gave way to various rumors. “The truth is that [Nikolai II] is known by everybody to be unfit mentally and physically to succeed the throne,”<sup>26</sup> speculated a reporter from *London Correspondent for The New York Times*. Aleksandr III’s brother, Grand Duke Vladimir, in fact, was considered a likely and desirable heir because of his Western inclinations. “[Grand Duke Vladimir] has a far more enlightened mind than his brother,” the reporter continued, “and is particularly free from the theological cranks and fads which made the present reign such a perplexing thing for modern Europe to accommodate itself to.”<sup>27</sup> But as hopes for the modern ruler on the throne of Russia dissipated, the world attempted to make sense of Nikolai II. “Never was a young man in graver need of safe advice than the czar,” wrote one

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia, *Once a Grand Duke* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart: 1932), 168.

<sup>26</sup> “The Czarowitz,” in “Foreign Affairs,” *Public Opinion* 28 (October 1894): 671.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

sympathizing American correspondent. “His situation is strange and dramatic [...] for which even the possession of the Russian crown must seem trifling compensation.”<sup>28</sup> The impressions of his ministers were rather cautious. “He is not an unintelligent man, but he lacks willpower,” noted his future nemesis, the “Grand Vizier” Count Sergei Witte.<sup>29</sup> “He is said to be inclined to Western ideas, to modern Liberalism to a greater extent than his father,”<sup>30</sup> suggested the reporter from *Le Temps*. “What will be his attitude towards Germany, towards Austria, and towards the Triple Alliance? What demeanor will he assume in respect of Bulgaria and Turkey? What instructions will he give to his Generals in Central Asia, and more especially on the Afghan frontier? What policy will he favor in the conflict into which China has been forced by Japan?”<sup>31</sup> Questions poured in from *The Standard*. Georges Clemenceau, the French politician, summed it up best: “What is [Nikolai] II? Nobody knows, possibly not even himself.”<sup>32</sup>

The uncertainty with which Nikolai II accepted his responsibility would come to characterize his reign, during which every decision he made was heavily scrutinized. His years on the throne were more action-packed than those of his father or even grandfather, neither of whom had to give up their autocratic power in a last-ditch effort to save the monarchy. Strikes by students and workers, assassinations of government officials, widespread corruption, massive bloodsheds, Jewish pogroms, a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, a social revolution of 1905, the agrarian riots of Stolypin’s reactionary years, World War I, and the Bolshevik

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<sup>28</sup> “Alexander III is dead. The Czar of Russia Quietly Passes Away. Czarewitch Nicholas Becomes the Emperor of All the Russias and Issues a Proclamation,” *The Eagle*, November 7, 1894.

<sup>29</sup> Sergei Witte, *Vospominaniia*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoi literatury, 1960), 291.

<sup>30</sup> “The Death of the Czar,” *Public Opinion*, 573.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 572.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 573.

Revolution were among the many political “performances” of his twenty-three years in power. “Nothing but new strikes in schools and factories, murdered policemen, Cossacks and soldiers, riots, disorder, mutinies,” he wrote to his mother in 1905. “But the ministers, instead of acting with quick decision, only assemble in council like a lot of frightened hens and cackle about providing united ministerial action.”<sup>33</sup> By conveniently shifting the blame onto others, Nikolai II watched turmoil to utterly destabilize the three central pillars of the Russian monarchy — orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality — which had been established by Nikolai I in 1833 as a belated response to the Decembrist revolt. Historians usually identify the roots of the Bolshevik revolution in the years preceding the event, which had grown into “several decades of growing violence, human suffering and repression, which had set the Tsar’s people against his regime.”<sup>34</sup> When Richard Schechner, an American theoretician of performance studies, suggests that there does not need to be a strictly theatrical situation to elicit theatrical behavior, this appears to be particularly true in the case of Russia’s state, during which said events unraveled before the politically charged society like a series of acts in a tragedy.

#### 4. “Restoring” Medievalism through Ritual

The practice of restoring medievalism through the performances of such rituals as processions or inaugural events, attempting to recreate something that no longer exists, is both reflexive and symbolic, a type of conduct that Schechner defines as *restored behavior*.<sup>35</sup> The participants — in this case, the Russian monarch and his courtiers — enter a state in which they

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<sup>33</sup> Edward J. Bing, ed. *The Letters of Tsar Nicholas and Empress Marie* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd, 1937), 187.

<sup>34</sup> Figes, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Schechner develops *restored behavior* from the concept “strip of experience,” first introduced by Erving Goffman, and defines it as a “living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film.” [Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35].

consciously reflect upon themselves and their surroundings.<sup>36</sup> Even though many of the ceremonies at Nikolai II's court that I examine were not theatrical events, they possessed a number of characteristics (scripted speeches, costumes, rehearsals) that justifies their inclusion into the realm of aesthetic performance. "The original 'truth' or 'source' of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted — even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed," writes Schechner about the authenticity of sources involved in this type of restoration. "How the strip of behavior was made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition."<sup>37</sup> Ritual, in this instance, becomes a balancing act for a society in peril that both reacts to disruptive circumstances from the outside and maintains the societal structure through these restorations. The appeal of these events, the great effort that went into them, and the enthusiasm of the attendees are demonstrative of the connection that binds the community that is involved in this type of performance.

"Ritual is also a way for people to connect to a collective, to remember or construct a mythic past, to build social solidarity, and to form or maintain a community,"<sup>38</sup> writes Schechner. The focus of my research is medieval rituals, which simply means any ritual that had an antecedent in the Russian Middle Ages. This dissertation employs British Anthropologist Victor Turner's original definition of ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This is an example of "effective" performance, which Schechner explains through the gap that exists between "the real" and "the performed." For example, Laurence Olivier in the role of Hamlet, writes Schechner, is not the Prince of Denmark, but he is also not *not* the Prince of Denmark: "[Olivier's] performance is between a denial of being another (= I am me) and a denial of not being another (= I am Hamlet)." (Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 123.)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 87.

<sup>39</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19.

I take into account such characteristics of ritual as transformative, spontaneous, and responsive actions, which Turner would later consider vital when addressing a crisis.<sup>40</sup> The advantage of Turner's definition is the relationship of ritual to performance, enactment, and "not primarily as rules or rubrics."<sup>41</sup> These medieval rituals can be religious or secular, individual or communal, singular or repetitive, structured or spontaneous, presented in real life or in fiction. The restoration of such rituals at the court of Nikolai II, such as his coronation, represents a kind of practice that Schechner regards as "double or incomplete presence, as a *here-and-now performance of there-and-then events*."<sup>42</sup> Rituals, in this view, are mechanisms that help to establish an identity and maintain order within a community. They also may subvert the community's social structure while dealing with conflicts between different groups. From this perspective, the outcome of a ritual can potentially determine whether the conflict is resolved, and if another conflict is created.

Since ritual resolves situations of crisis by commanding an important change in an individual or collective as it passes from one state to another, it is inextricably tied with the notion of crisis. As such, it is ritual that informs the most important moments of what Turner

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<sup>40</sup> Turner would critique this approach to ritual later in his career for the following reason: "It is a flat description of ritual action as it appears to an alien observer and says nothing about what ritual means to a native actor. Nor does it capture the transformative capacity of ritual, its competency, from the actor's standpoint, to raise him from a lower to a higher level of knowledge, understanding, or social being. Nor does it correctly characterize the component of spontaneity present in most ritual, its responsiveness to present circumstance and its competence to interpret the current situation and provide viable ways of coping with contemporary problems." [Victor Turner, "Encounter with Freud: The Making of a Comparative Symbolist," in *The Making of Psychological Anthropology*, ed. George D. Spindler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): 560.] Despite the original definition's shortcomings, Turner appreciated it for interpreting ritual not as a standardized unit act but as a performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts.

<sup>41</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater. The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 79.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1986), 169. Original italics.

calls *social drama*.<sup>43</sup> He proposes to think of social dramas as “units of aharmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations.”<sup>44</sup> Turner himself applies this notion to various sociohistorical phenomena that allow one to uncover social dramas in history. For example, he uses the Mexican Revolution of Independence in 1810 as an armed confluence that begins a period of transition during which the colonized nation (Mexico) asserts its own paradigms against the colonizer (Spain).<sup>45</sup> Turner identifies the eleven years of struggle for independence from 1810-1821 as “a complex and dramatic liminal period” during which the nation moves from colonial rule to nationhood by generating “new myths, symbols, paradigms, and political structures.”<sup>46</sup> The years of Nikolai II’s rule can similarly be viewed as a period of transition that consists of a series of social dramas with medieval revival as one of several paradigms that defines their cultural landscape. Two national myths, in particular, which this dissertation examines, emerge through the performance of these medieval rituals: the myths of tsar (authority) and of revolution (rebellion). Ritual thus becomes a way of performing medievalism and hence a constituent part of this phenomenon’s revival in the Russian Empire.

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<sup>43</sup> During his fieldwork with the Ndembu tribe in Congo in the 1950s, Turner developed the concept of *social drama* as a methodology for analyzing how conflict management within the tribe can serve as a model for other societies. This model, in Turner’s view, illustrates how conflicts are handled, mitigated, resolved, and even predicted. These social processes, he argues, consist of a sequence of four phases: *breach*, *crisis*, *redress*, and *reintegration*.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37.

<sup>45</sup> Turner would refer to any period of instability and unprecedented social change, as *liminal* years. Turner borrows the term from Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1875-1957) who employs the term “liminal” (*limen*, Lat.), meaning threshold, when describing the ritual known as a *rite of passage* during which an individual completes a transition from one state to another. Van Gennep proposes studying the rite of passage within the context of a tripartite structure: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

## 5. *Medievalism as Pretext*

The modernist credo of “art for art’s sake” reigned in the age when the works of the French *poets maudits* inspired new generations of Russian writers, poets, and playwrights, who often explicitly presented their efforts as imitations. This was the case with Valerii Briusov’s *Symbolism (Imitations and Translations)* [Simvolizm (Podrazhaniia i perevody)] (1893). “We must find the guiding star in the fog. And I see it: it is decadence,”<sup>47</sup> Briusov famously declared. The proliferation of talent in literature, music, architecture, fashion, and the visual arts, along with monumental scientific discoveries, propelled the expectation of tremendous changes. Intellectuals recognized an unavoidable clash between a society moving forward and the stagnating political system of autocracy and controlled freedoms. Contemporary observers such as Noble wrote openly about Russia as “a veritable fifteenth-century state wearing the habiliments of the nineteenth” or “not only not modern, but [...] at least 400 years *en retard* as compared with western Europe.”<sup>48</sup> Figes summarizes this discrepancy in attitudes, noting that while people were eager to embrace modernity, there persisted a medieval propensity in the rule of the Romanovs:

But the last two tsars and their more reactionary supporters — in the gentry, the Church and Rightist political circles — were at best ambiguous towards the idea of ‘modernization’. They knew, for example, that they needed a modern industrial economy in order to compete with the Western powers; yet at the same time they were deeply hostile to the political demands and social transformations of the urban industrial order. Instead of embracing reform they adhered obstinately to their own archaic vision of autocracy. It was their tragedy that just as Russia was entering the twentieth century they were trying to return it to the seventeenth.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Valerii Briusov, *Dnevnik: 1891-1910* (Moscow: M. i S. Sabashnikovych, 1927), 12.

<sup>48</sup> Noble, 256 and 254. Original italics.

<sup>49</sup> Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, 14.

This nostalgic fascination with the Middle Ages and its eclectic invocation in politics and the arts emerged in a culture that was in some ways still pre-secular but modern enough to turn these practices into a meta-phenomenon. This kind of medieval revival can thus be best categorized as *pretext* — one of the categories of the Middle Ages delineated by Eco — in which the actors show “no real interest in the historical background” and “the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, recovered medievalism provides the background for the performances of the period, which in the case of Russia were impacted by the ideology of the governing system. Throughout this dissertation, I use Eco’s definition of the phenomenon but refer to all types of recreations as “medieval” as opposed to “neo-medieval”. In my view, medievalism exists in all historical periods, in which the Middle Ages were recovered in one form or another.

How does the Russian sense of crisis fit in with the general sense thereof prevalent in Europe at the end of the century? The dissertation argues that one of the ways in which this sense of crisis expresses itself is through a series of performances that can be seen as reflexes of the sociopolitical conditions. Russian medievalism in the beginning of the twentieth century is not so much a trend that is borrowed (despite its precedent in the European revivals and imitations of thereof) as it is a parallel phenomenon largely because of its ideological constituent. “The Middle Ages have never been reconstructed from scratch,” writes Eco, “we have always mended or patched [The Middle Ages] up, as something in which we still live.”<sup>51</sup> This appears to be true for Russian society of the *fin de siècle*, which “patches up” its version of the Middle Ages depending on the occasion and in the process creates its own vision of history.

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<sup>50</sup> Eco, 68.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

Before Eco's essay defined neo-medievalism and made it a fashionable phenomenon of post-modernism, the concept of the revival of the Middle Ages had already received a decent amount of attention in the works of twentieth-century historians, philosophers, literary scholars, politicians, sociologists, and other theoreticians who explore this ever-shifting relationship with the Middle Ages and manipulate their respective discourses to explain relevance of this historical period. Arnold Toynbee, for instance, emphasizes the role of medievalism in reconstructing and rebuilding the political system in the West and defines the end of the Middle Ages within the confines of the relationship between man and God. "Modernity had begun at the moment when Western Man thanked not God but himself that he had outgrown his 'medieval' Christian discipline,"<sup>52</sup> Toynbee writes. Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919) underscores the pessimism and melancholy that pervade the period, whereas Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1966) presents the "waning" medieval world as straddling the official and carnival parts of life that fundamentally reintroduces it through the lens of grotesque humor. While Toynbee, Huizinga, Bakhtin, and others examine the Middle Ages, they develop political, cultural, and social models that suggest or present comparisons with those of the modern world. One of the recent and ongoing studies on the subject of neo-medievalism is a three-volume collection of essays, *Rewriting the Middle Ages in the Twentieth Century* (2005-2015), that studies its role in social and national identities, traditions and narratives, cultural and political thought. Many of these studies share the tendency to interpret the Middle Ages as a period of progress as opposed to stagnation, which is reimagined anew through various cultural practices of the twentieth century.

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<sup>52</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vols. VII-X, abr. D.C. Somervell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 150.

Berdiaev may have been the first to formally introduce the term “New Middle Ages” in Russian scholarship, but the philosophical ideas about the Middle Ages were also developed in the works of his contemporaries, such as Pavel Florenskii and Aleskei Losev. While the subject of medievalism remained popular with Soviet scholars, for whom it represented a safe area of research far removed from Soviet ideology, post-Soviet scholars examined the characteristics of medieval revivals after gaining access to previously-inaccessible archives. Revival of medievalism in itself remains an extraordinarily broad subject. The existing scholarship has largely neglected to consider the intersections of various nodes of cultural productions via common denominators, which is the goal of this dissertation. The comprehensive history of the late imperial period is documented in the works by Richard Pipes, Orlando Figes, and Richard Wortman, and includes detailed analyses of various court practices and ideology that informs them. Despite the overwhelming number of materials written about mystery plays and the symbolist theater, including a long list of dissertations, all published in the last thirty years, none of them examines the sociopolitical implications of the genre from this dissertation’s proposed theoretical angle. George Kalbous’s *The Plays of the Russian Symbolists* (1982), Boris Bugrov’s *Dramaturgy of Russian Symbolism* [Dramaturgiia russkogo simvolizma] (1993), and Lidumila Borisova’s *Breaking with the Tradition: Dramaturgy of Russian Symbolism and a Symbolist Theory of Life-Creation* [Na izlomakh traditsii. Dramaturgiia russkogo simvolizma i simvolistskaia teoriia zhiznetvorchestva] (2000) are among the key texts that aid in understanding the background against which the genre of mystery plays in the works of Russian symbolists was developed. Aleksandr Khanzhonkov’s memoirs, Veniamin Vishnevskii’s two film catalogues, as well as books by Semen Ginzburg, Jay Leyda, Yuri Tsivian, and Denise J.

Youngblood, provide a solid overview of the early years of film-making, which include detailed information about “tsar’s chronicles” and “acted” films.

The scholarship on symbolist theater takes into account the popularity of the medieval aesthetics and recognizes Vladimir Solov’ev’s philosophical doctrine as exerting the greatest influence on those symbolists who employed medieval themes when developing new models of Russian drama.<sup>53</sup> It was the Russian symbolist movement, after all, that formed the basis for the revival that became known as Russia’s Silver Age. Marked by an efflorescence of talent in literature and the arts, this period produced intellectuals who looked back at the Middle Ages for inspiration. Solov’ev was among the first Russian thinkers to draw attention to the medieval period in an 1891 lecture that defined the medieval worldview as a historical “compromise” between Christianity and paganism: “a dual half-pagan and half-Christian order of concepts and life that was formed and prevailed during the Middle Ages, both in the Romano-Germanic West and in the Byzantine East.”<sup>54</sup> The philosopher blames Byzantium for failing to create a true Christian society and for choosing individual salvation at the expense of social transformation in a world that accepted Christianity but never completely rejected paganism. Solov’ev concluded his talk with the scandalous statement that the presence of this duality led Christians to renounce the Spirit of Christ, and that unbelievers are the ones who work in the name of Christianity. His other writings emphasize the concept of a world that is full of uncertainty and teetering on the brink of destruction. Such, for instance, is his portrayal of the false Messiah in *Three*

*Conversations about War, Progress and the End of World History* [Tri razgovora o voine,

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<sup>53</sup> For external and internal philosophical influences on the symbolists, see A. Khanzen-Leve’s *Der Russische Symbolismus* (1989), Avril Pyman’s *A History of Russian Symbolism* (1994), and Chapters 2, 3 & 4 in G.M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole’s *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830-1930. Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity* (2010).

<sup>54</sup> Vladimir Solov’ev. “Referat V.S. Solov’eva, chitannyy v zasedanii Moskovskogo Psikhologicheskogo Obshchestva, 19-go oktiabria 1891 goda,” *Vopsory filosofii i psikhologii* 56 (January-February 1901), 138.

progresse i kontse vsemirnoi istorii] (1910), which are constructed in dramatic form. The false Messiah is depicted as someone who has been driven by pride and power and yet remains remarkably powerless when faced with Christ's true believers during the earth's last days. Such concepts as Blok's "Eternal Feminine" (in *Verses about a Beautiful Lady*), Merezhkovskii's "Third Testament" [in *The Coming Boor* [Griadushchii kham] (1906)], or Belyi's attempts at a dramatic trilogy devoted to the theme of the Antichrist's arrival, were influenced by Solov'ev's ideas. The belief that the world had been thrust into chaos reassured these writers that the time had come to rediscover art's function and meaning.

#### 6. *Objective*

The present study of Russian medieval revival focuses on three disparate but related cultural venues in which it found particularly striking expression: the imperial court, the theatrical stage and — perhaps most strikingly — the modern "stage" of cinema, the twentieth century's pre-eminent art form. Chapter 1 (The Court Culture of Make-Believe) examines the recreations of medieval rituals — processions, role-plays, canonizations, and pilgrimages — practiced at the court of Nikolai II and examines the ideological discourse informing them. The roots of these practices date back to the Muscovite revival of Aleksandr III's years, but they take on different forms and pursue other purposes during the reign of his son. Chapter 2 (Rituals of Passage in Modernist Dramas) investigates the literary genre of modernist mystery plays and a specific ritual — the rite of passage — depicted in these dramas. The goal is to show how rituals of passage — the theater itself in Aleksei Remizov's *Comedy of the Devils*, the quest in Aleksandr Blok's *The Song of Fate*, and the trial in Leonid Andreev's *Tsar Hunger* — embody religious and secular behaviors, and how they can be read as sociopolitical commentaries on the period. Chapter 3 (Costume Dramas and the Tsar's Chronicles) synthesizes the findings of the

previous chapters by analyzing the myths that they identify — the myth of a tsar (from chapter 1) and the myth of a revolution (from chapter 2) — and how these myths emerge in silent films of the era. The focus is on a documentary genre of “tsar’s chronicles” and “acted” films, which became known as “costume dramas.” The conclusion examines how the social drama of late Imperial Russia is articulated and resolved in all of these aesthetic dramas of the period.

This dissertation is not a full-length study of medieval revival in Russian culture or its emergence in the chosen nodes of cultural production of court culture, drama, and film. The latter would extend beyond the realm of courtly functions to political methods of government, include dramas on medieval themes that are not mystery plays, and consider all costume dramas that were filmed during these years. This dissertation, therefore, should be read as a study of three *expressions* of the medieval aesthetic and their correlations. The selection is based on the theatricality of the chosen realms, which runs the risk of being considered subjective insofar as any social action can be seen as a form of theater. My argument is that the selected case studies effectively illustrate the connection between a stage drama and a political episode. A compelling critique can also be made against the chosen examples being imitations of Western “originals” as opposed to instances that are innate to Russian culture. In order to address it, let us again return to Custine, who writes the following about the Russians: “They have no creative power; comparison is their talent, imitation is their genius.”<sup>55</sup> To be sure, these three manifestations of medievalism in the court culture, drama, and film begin as imitations of their Western counterparts, but quickly develop their own idiosyncratic vision of history that is unlike that of the “originals” that inspired them. This vision in particular emerges from the intersection of ideology and aesthetics.

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<sup>55</sup> Custine, 597.

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the relationship between the performance of rituals and the revival of medievalism in Russia's court culture, drama, and film at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike other similar studies, which tend to focus exclusively on the phenomenon of medieval revival in specific cultural areas, my innovation lies in its cross-media approach, thereby enhancing our understanding of this relationship. The comparative method of analysis employs theories from the fields of history, political science, anthropology, performance studies, and sociology to address the following questions:

1. How is the medieval revival of the Russian *fin de siècle* different from the Muscovite Revival of the late nineteenth century?
2. How does the performance of medieval rituals in court culture, drama, and film articulate this period of transition?
3. What are the correlations among the selected instances of "high" culture?

The dissertation focuses specifically upon the reenactment of medieval rituals that generate new myths, modify existing ones, and offer different ways of thinking about them. "Late Imperial Russia" refers to the period of the last tsar, which lasted from October 20 (November 1) in 1894 until his abdication on March 2 (15) in 1917, with the peak of the medieval revival coinciding with the years preceding World War I, 1894-1914. Assessing this period of transition through political and cultural "performances" of the period helps to move theoretical concepts out of their abstract framework and connect them with concrete historical processes.

The period under consideration is a period of transition of Russian's society into modernity; a chaotic and revolutionary period in history that is articulated through medievalism. This medievalism involves certain practices, in which ritual plays an important part by temporarily restoring the past and reminding a deteriorating society of its glory. The focus is on

the ideological functions of this aesthetic phenomenon, which demonstrates how a historical moment can organize dramatic thought and create dramatic situations not only on the stage but in real life.



THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

SHADE OF KING LOUIS THE SIXTEENTH (to the Czar). "SIDE WITH YOUR PEOPLE, SIRE, WHILE THERE IS YET TIME. I WAS TOO LATE!"

Figure 1: A prophetic warning from the ghost of Louis XVI in the British *Punch* on November 15, 1905: "Side with your people, Sire, while there is yet time. I was too late!"

The historian Richard Pipes notes the dangers in using historical analogies for explaining historical events, but he cannot resist a parallel between eighteenth-century France and twentieth-century Russia: "The intellectual atmosphere of late Imperial Russia closely resembled that of *ancien regime* France on the eve of the Revolution and the circles of *philosophes* anticipated those of the Russian intelligentsia," he writes. "The analogy emphasizes to what extent intellectual trends can be self-generated."<sup>56</sup> Medievalism is an "intellectual trend" that develops in part as a response to the crisis of the state during a particularly fraught moment in

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 129. Original italics.

Russian history. “[Nikolai II] is living in an utter fool’s paradise, thinking that He is as strong and all-powerful as before,”<sup>57</sup> wrote Witte in his diary in October of 1905. In his view, the tsar, whom he would later call “a hundred percent Byzantine,”<sup>58</sup> purposefully avoided the hostile present that needed his attention.

The “fool’s paradise” shines through instances of “antiquated medievalism,” against which a British reporter once cautioned a young man who inherited the throne. This phenomenon attains a brand-new image during Nikolai II’s years in power through the country’s collective regression into the Middle Ages in arts and politics. The rule of the last Russian tsar, which began expectedly with the death (albeit unexpected) of his father, was officially confirmed through the lavish coronation ceremony during which Nikolai II became a monarch before God — a ceremony that, as *The New York Times* writes, was “entirely foreign to modern and European ways of thinking.”<sup>59</sup> The old-fashioned splendor of the much-anticipated occasion resurrected medieval leitmotifs that would come to characterize Nikolai II’s Russia. The country became a stage where the past would often reemerge to communicate, in the words of an American reporter, the feeling of being out of place and out of time in the modern world.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Figes, 191.

<sup>58</sup> Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia, 179.

<sup>59</sup> “The Coronation of the Czar,” in “Foreign Affairs,” *Public Opinion* 23 (June 1896), 714.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 1: The Court Culture of Make-Believe

### 1. *The Medieval Ball of 1903*

“All of us appeared in seventeenth-century court dress,”<sup>61</sup> is how the Grand Duchess Ol’ga Aleksandrova, the youngest sister of Nikolai II, remembered the extraordinary event, the so-called *le bal d’hiver* that took place in the winter of 1903 in St. Petersburg. The two-day occasion, preceded by elaborate preparations and rehearsals, began at the Hermitage Palace on February 11 (24) and continued with a costume ball at the Winter Palace on February 13 (26). “How beautiful the gala looked filled with people of ancient Rus’,”<sup>62</sup> wrote the Russian tsar about this day in his diary. The celebrations proved such a success that they again reconvened with the *soirée* at the Sheremetev Palace on February 14 (27), which was considered the event’s third and unofficial installment. The exquisite affair commemorating 290 years of the Romanov dynasty, by all accounts, presented “the most spectacular evocation of Muscovy”<sup>63</sup> was set in the northern capital of the Russian Empire but was not an imitation of any similar event from Russia’s medieval past: neither the ball as a social event nor the city of St. Petersburg existed in seventeenth-century Muscovy.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, these evenings of great opulence, with the aristocracy parading in fancy dresses of pre-Petrine times in honor of the imperial family, represented a tribute to the reign of Aleksei Mikhailovich (1629-1676), the second ruler of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ian Vorres, *The Last Grand-Duchess* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 102.

<sup>62</sup> Sergei Mironenko, eds. *Dnevnik imperatora Nikolaia II, 1894-1918*, vol. 1 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2011), 712.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 377.

<sup>64</sup> The first ball took place at the wedding of Lzhedmitrii I and Marina Mnischek in 1606. The European-styled balls were officially instantiated by Peter I in 1717.

Romanov dynasty.<sup>65</sup> The accession of his father, Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov, ended the turbulent and uncertain period known as the Time of Troubles (1598-1613) and initiated a healing process for the country that was slowly emerging from wars, riots, famines, and a struggle for power. The exquisite gala, which has since been referred to as the last real ball of Imperial Russia, was thus regarded as not only an evening of entertainment, but as an event that was a part of the tsar's ideological campaign.



*Figure 2: Nikolai II (as Aleksei Mikhailovich) and Aleksandra (as Mariia Miloslavskaia) during the medieval ball of 1903.*

“We spent a long time with [Ivan Vsevolozhskii, the director of the Hermitage Museum] choosing jewelry which was brought from the Armoury Chamber in Moscow for my costume of the times of Aleksei Mikhailovich,”<sup>66</sup> Nikolai II wrote in his diary. In addition to the medieval

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<sup>65</sup> In 1911 the German Playing Card manufacture *Dondorf* from Frankfurt am Main created the design for the playing cards “The Russian Style” (Русский стиль), which were inspired by the costumes from the ball of 1903. The cards were produced in St. Petersburg for the tercentenary of the Romanov Dynasty.

<sup>66</sup> Mironenko, vol. 1, 711.

robe, he carried Aleksei Mikhailovich's staff and wore several authentic pieces, which included the jewel-studded cuffs, once in the possession of Fedor Ivanovich (son of Ivan the Terrible).

Like other participants, the tsar recognized that much of the event's success depended on the elaborate costumes, which were donned for the occasion:

Courtiers came dressed as boyars, *okol'niche* (the rank below boyar), and other servitors of seventeenth-century Muscovy. Their wives were bedecked in robes patterned on those of the seventeenth-century and studded with ancestral jewels. The guards were in uniforms of the *strel'tsy*, the musketeers of old Russia. [Nikolai II] wore the gold-brocaded processional robe and the crown of tsar [Aleksei] Mikhailovich, while [Aleksandra] came as the first of [Aleksei]'s wives, [Mariia] Miloslavskaiia, and wore a specially designed gown, brocaded in silver, and a miter set with a huge emerald pendant surrounded by diamonds.<sup>67</sup>

The Muscovite dress turned the commemorative evening into a costume competition. As it happened, the medieval-themed soirees that required their participants to wear a national dress were in fashion during these years. For example, the historical evenings of this kind were a popular pastime at the Russian Assembly, the right-wing monarchist political party that was founded by Prince Dmitrii Golitsyn. The ball of 1903 at the Winter Palace was, by all accounts, the ultimate showcase of nobility's fascination with Medieval Rus'. The faithfulness to the times of seventeenth-century Muscovy made this celebration different from other historically themed balls that preceded it. "All other guests followed their fancy, always remaining within the limits of the seventeenth century,"<sup>68</sup> remembered Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich, the husband of Nikolai II's sister Kseniia (Xenia). The Russian tsar became so inspired by the success of the ball that he even considered changing the dresses of his courtiers to resemble those of seventeenth-century boyars. "An artist had been set to work on the necessary models. But in the end the plan had to be abandoned because of the expense it would have entailed," Aleksandr Mosolov, the

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<sup>67</sup> Wortman, 377.

<sup>68</sup> Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia, *Once a Grand Duke* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart: 1932), 211.

head of the court chancellery, wrote. “The boyars were clothed in extremely expensive furs, and wore too many diamonds and rubies and pearls.”<sup>69</sup>



*Figure 3: “[Kseniia] wore a very becoming costume of a ‘boyarina,’ richly embroidered and covered with glittering jewels. For myself I had chosen the costume of a court falconer, consisting of a white-and gold long coat, — with golden eagles embroidered on the breast and on the back, — a pink silk shirt, blue silk trousers and yellow leather boots.” (Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich, *Once a Grand Duke*).*

These celebrations came to be recognized at Nikolai II’s court as an extension of conservative sensibility and a way of organizing courtly behavior. The occasion of the imperial ball in February of 1903 offered an opportunity for the nobility to transform for a time into boyars and *boiarynias* of Russian Middle Ages. But perhaps most tellingly in this regard, was the costume choice of the Russian monarch who, as Aleksei Mikhailovich, still retained the highest rank in this reimagined version of the Muscovite hierarchy.

The recreations of the Muscovite way of life by various societies, groups, and assemblies in Late Imperial Russia promoted patriotic attitudes. For older generations of men, for example,

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<sup>69</sup> Aleksandr Mosolov, *At the Court of the Last Tsar: Being the Memoirs of A.A. Mosolov, Head of the Court Chancellery, 1900-1916*, trans. Ernest Walter Dicks (London: Methuen, 1935), 21.

maintaining facial hair, such as a peasant-style (ironically known by a foreign word of “пейзанская”) beard during the reign of Aleksandr III, became a fashion statement, an indicator of traditional views, and, quite often, Slavophilism.<sup>70</sup> “Artists, historians, jewelers, dressmakers, and cooks became fascinated with the distant, beautiful, and sinless mother Rus’,” writes Ol’ga Khoroshilova, “as they were restoring the old way of life bit by bit.”<sup>71</sup> The women of high society experimented with versions of a so-called “Russian dress” at public and private functions. The Russian dress that experienced its first bout of revival at the court of Ekaterina (Catherine) II presented an elaboration on the version of a folk dress, known as *sarafan*, with a headdress, *kokoshnik*. The dress continued its appeal to national pride during the nineteenth century and became exceptionally popular during Nikolai II’s rule.<sup>72</sup> The medieval leitmotifs even surfaced in the discussions about new army uniforms with suggestions to improve their look by incorporating various medieval attributes.<sup>73</sup> The last tsar himself also opted to wear red peasant-style shirts at home and even underneath his uniform. “I thought it would be impossible for anybody to be more Russian than I am,”<sup>74</sup> Mosolov recalled the sovereign’s words to singer Nadezhda Plevitskaia, after she performed a Russian folk song for the tsar. The passionate nationalism of the monarch was well-known. Nikolai II avoided the usage of foreign words and sought to bring linguistic archaisms back into the Russian language by ordering the retention of

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<sup>70</sup> Khoroshilova, 423.

<sup>71</sup> Ol’ga Khoroshilova, *Kostium i moda Rossiiskoi imperii: Epokha Nikolaia II* (Moscow: Eterna, 2012), 69.

<sup>72</sup> Svetlana Amelekhina and Daniel Green: “Ceremonial ‘Russian Dress’ as a Phenomenon of Court Culture.” *Clothing Cultures* 3 (December 2016): 191-218.

<sup>73</sup> Pavel Shipov’s *Russian Military Clothes* [Russkaia voennaia odezhda] (1901).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

the “old Slavonic forms of spelling in official documents and publications long after they had been phased out in literary Russian.”<sup>75</sup>

While the costume ball of 1903 may have been the most medieval of the celebrations, with its stage set to imitate a selected historical period, it was still one of many ceremonies performed at the court that year. This was a culture that thrived on various types of performances, including observances ranging from simple daily rituals to others that required scrupulous preparations. The events held at the imperial court each year could be classified into at least four categories: state, annual, special (dedications, memorials, anniversaries), and personal (majority ceremonies, christenings).<sup>76</sup> Notable celebrations involved courtly processions, the annual reception of the diplomatic corps, religious services, imperial balls, military parades, the opening of new facilities, ship launchings, monument dedications, anniversaries of important battles,<sup>77</sup> and other commemorations<sup>78</sup> that were purposefully outlandish, carefully orchestrated, and came at a high monetary cost. The medieval-themed ball in February of 1903 at the Winter Palace, a residence conceived in the beginning of the eighteenth century by Peter I, reintroduced the grand illusion that transported its participants to “a different time-space continuum, a cultural and aesthetic universe distant from Petersburg society.”<sup>79</sup> The attempts on the part of the twentieth-century Russian court at restoring Medieval Rus’ for this particular event were based on chronicles, letters, books, and portraits, which were

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<sup>75</sup> Figes, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Greg King, *The Court of the Last Tsar: Pomp, Power, and Pageantry in the Reign of Nicholas II* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 303.

<sup>77</sup> For example, the bicentennial of the Battle of Poltava (1709) and the centennial of the Battle of Borodino (1812).

<sup>78</sup> For example, the bicentennial of the foundation of St. Petersburg (1703) and the semi centennial of the abolition of serfdom (1861).

<sup>79</sup> Wortman, 378.

consulted in creating these historically accurate costumes. As the court transformed itself into its seventeenth-century version, it engendered a cultural “clash” with “actors” strolling around the palace’s neoclassical rooms instead of the historical residence of the tsars at the Kremlin. The performance was, in fact, exemplary of restored behavior that develops from the clash between past and present to create, as Turner would have it, “the fire of meaning.”<sup>80</sup> The state newspapers stepped up to the occasion and reported about these evenings of lavishness in great detail. For example, *Moskovskie vedomosti* devoted a lengthy article to the ball, with descriptions of the imperial family, their guests, processions, dances, and seating arrangements. They noted the tiniest of details such as the costumes of the musicians of the imperial orchestra and the theatrical programs for the evening, which were printed in the orthography of the seventeenth century.<sup>81</sup> Such attention legitimized the event’s function of reaffirming the roots of the Russian monarchical order at a time when the absolute monarchy was nearing its final year. The spectacular celebration of the cult of seventeenth-century Muscovy, suggests Figes, showed “the Romanovs retreating to the past hoping it would save them from the future.”<sup>82</sup>

## 2. *The Devonshire House Ball and Other Historically-Themed Balls*

The Devonshire House Ball, which took place on July 2, 1897, in honor of Tsarina Aleksandra’s grandmother, Queen Victoria, for her diamond jubilee at the Devonshire House in London, is generally considered to be a principle inspiration of the aforementioned Russian ball of 1903.<sup>83</sup> The Duchess of Devonshire defined the theme of the event as mythical or real courts

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<sup>80</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, xi.

<sup>81</sup> N. K., “Spektakl’ i kostiumirovannyi bal v imperatorskom ermitazhe,” *Moskovskie vedomosti*, February 14 (27), 1903.

<sup>82</sup> Figes, 6.

<sup>83</sup> The Devonshire Ball was inspired by the Bradley-Martin ball that was held at the Waldorf Hotel in New York City on February 10, 1897. The first among these grandiose celebrations was the ball that was organized by Alva

of the past, which inspired her guests to show up dressed as all sorts of characters ranging from the gods of Ancient Greece to more recent royals, like Marie Antoinette. The theme of the Russian imperial ball of 1903, was focused specifically on the seventeenth century, which was just one of many aesthetic differences between these two occasions. The main differences, however, were ideological. If the British nobility gathered to celebrate the jubilee of the sovereign of an established constitutional monarchy, secure in their devotion and reverence, the Russians were attending an event that aimed to promote the autocratic power of a ruler who could not boast this kind of loyalty. Unlike Queen Victoria, who did not care to attend the occasion, Nikolai II not only took an active part in its organization but attended the ball as a medieval tsar.

The British ball, in fact, had more in common with two other Russian venues, which were held during the reign of Nikolai II's father.<sup>84</sup> The first was a costume ball that took place on January 25 (February 6) in 1883 at the palace of Nikolai II's uncle, Vladimir Aleksandrovich, and his wife, Mariia Pavlovna. The theme of the ball was loosely defined as pre-Petrine, but the dress code was not strictly enforced. As with the Devonshire House Ball, over two hundred guests arrived in a variety of costumes that included "boyars, Scythians, Varangians, and citizens of Novgorod"<sup>85</sup>; some even came dressed as pagan creatures. Aleksandr III also came to the event, but stood out as the only one who chose not to don a medieval costume. The emperor's secretary, Aleksandr Polovtsov, remembered the emperor's indifference to the ball, which he left shortly after the supper, whereas his wife, Mariia Fedorovna, remained and danced until the wee

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and William K. Vanderbilt in 1883. These events quickly grew popular as opportunities at showcasing wealth and fashion, and the royals of Europe took notice.

<sup>84</sup> The first ball-masquerade "England and Russia" (Англия и Россия) that promoted the theme of the seventeenth century Muscovy took place on February 9 (21), 1849 at the house of the governor-general Arsenii Zakrevskii.

<sup>85</sup> Wortman, 273.

hours of the morning. “The Empress wore a historically accurate dress of a tsarina, which was created by Gregorii Gagarin,” writes Polovtsov. “My wife is in a Russian costume of the eleventh century, my daughter in a Tatar dress, and I am in the costume of [Petr] Potemkin from the famous engraving, a diplomat [for Aleksei Mikhailovich] who travelled as an ambassador to England.”<sup>86</sup> Grand Duke Nikolai, then the fifteen-year-old heir to the Russian throne, did not attend the event.

Nikolai II did, however, attend another such occasion: a second medieval-themed ball during his father’s reign, which took place on February 21 (March 5) 1894 at the Sheremetev Palace. The twenty-six-year-old Grand Duke arrived in a historically accurate costume: “In the evening, I put on the coat of a ‘falconer’ of the times of Aleksei Mikhailovich,”<sup>87</sup> he wrote in his diary. Quite expectedly, the state newspapers rushed with flatteries: “How exquisite was the costume of a falconer, embroidered with golden eagles on scarlet velvet and golden cuffs. How picturesquely it fell in beautiful folds and hugged his slender waist.”<sup>88</sup> Nikolai II recorded in his diary that his parents arrived late in the evening and left immediately after dinner. The Russian emperor once again largely ignored the event, which was aimed at a younger generation and at which one of the biggest amusements was a sleigh pulled by bears. Unlike his father, Nikolai II, showed much interest in these occasions, and, as if remaining faithful to a particular historical

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<sup>86</sup> Aleksandr Polovtsov, *Dnevnik gosudarstvennogo sekretaria, 1883-1886*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2005), 38.

<sup>87</sup> Mironenko, vol. 1, 53.

<sup>88</sup> “Bal u grafa A.D. Sheremeteva.” *Vsemirnaia illiustratsiia* 1313 (March 1894): 217.

epoch, he “graduated” from the ranks of falconer to medieval tsar ten years later, just as he advanced from a grand duke to emperor.



Figure 4: Grand Duke Nikolai as a falconer during the ball of 1894.



Figure 5: “[Kseniia] dressed as a boyar’s wife and Sandro as the head of *strel’tsy*.” (Nikolai II’s diary).

If the British and Russian monarchs showed little interest in these late nineteenth century occasions of the 1890s — Queen Victoria did not attend an event that was organized in her honor, and Aleksandr III showed up in 1883 sans historical costume and only briefly in 1894 — their indifference attests to the nature of these occasions as being no more than evenings of entertainment. Nikolai II’s attention to these gatherings and his active participation, on the other hand, illustrates that he regarded these events as state occasions that could be of benefit to his image.<sup>89</sup> But the Russian tsar was not the only ruler who was fond of this monarchical preoccupation. The festivities of the 1898 jubilee year in Austro-Hungary, for instance, were also organized to promote the patriotic spirit of the multinational Habsburg Monarchy and aggrandize

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<sup>89</sup> The final annual grand ball of the Russian Empire (albeit not on a medieval theme), known as the Nikolaev Ball (Николаевский бал) was held on January 19 (February 1), 1904, one week before the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War.

the figure of its emperor. In this respect, the medieval performances of Nikolai II's years are examples of strategies that were employed by other European rulers.

### 3. *Russian Pageantry, Prussian Chivalry*

The king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795-1861), known as the “Romantic on the throne” (Romantiker auf dem Thron), was also keen on organizing festivals that were rich in medieval motifs. If Nikolai II desired to see the Russian state evoke the spirit of Holy Rus' then Friedrich Wilhelm IV was said to nurture a dream of seeing Germany as the epitome of the medieval Holy Roman Empire instead of a modern, centralized nation-state.<sup>90</sup> Both rulers inherited their fascination with medieval ceremonies from their fathers. Like Grand Duke Nikolai, who was present for the medieval ball of 1894 in a costume of a falconer, Prince Friedrich Wilhelm IV donned a medieval knight costume and participated in the knightly tournament of the White Rose — an extravagant festival to celebrate the birthday of the Russian Empress Aleksandra Fedorovna<sup>91</sup> on 13 July of 1829 at the New Palace (Neues Palais) of Sanssouci in Potsdam. These knightly tournaments were quite popular with the royal families of Europe.<sup>92</sup> Like Nikolai II, who would seek assurance of his own stature in these elaborate “recreations” of Muscovy, Friedrich Wilhelm IV turned to the glorious times of the Crusades as a way of coping with a wave of Romantic nationalism that swept through Europe during his twenty-one years on the Prussian throne (1840-1861).

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<sup>90</sup> Eva Giloi, *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 126.

<sup>91</sup> Aleksandra Fedorovna, born Princess Charlotte of Prussia (1798–1860), daughter of Friedrich Wilhelm III, younger sister of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, wife of Nikolai I, and mother of Aleksandr II.

<sup>92</sup> The Eglinton Tournament in 1839 or the Tournament of Brussels in 1905 entertained the British nation by reviving the spirit of its medieval past in the most spectacular way.

The purpose of Friedrich Wilhelm IV's "monarchical project"<sup>93</sup> was to present the king as a modern ruler who used public reenactments of Prussia's medieval past as a way of reaffirming the legitimacy of the royal order. The king, it appears, as did other European conservatives, had to adapt older forms of monarchical ritual to new ends or purposes, which often "involved the appropriation of specifically medieval motifs and models in an attempt to lay the foundations for a new kind of popular, anti-revolutionary monarchism."<sup>94</sup> The ceremony of homage (*Huldigung*) in celebration of Friedrich Wilhelm IV's accession to the Prussian throne in September of 1840 paid respect to the historical past by being held at the settlement of the Teutonic Knights in Königsberg.<sup>95</sup> It included an oath taking by the future king and elaborate performances in *tableaux vivants* that presented historical narratives from the country's chivalric past. The evocation of the Middle Ages perpetrated the idea of a conflict-free, harmonious, and orderly world with a sense of continuity between the chivalric past and the monarchic-conservative present.<sup>96</sup>

The decision to archaize the facades of their countries through architecture constitutes another historical parallel between these Prussian and Russian rulers. Like his father, Nikolai II preferred the golden domed landscape of Moscow to the European architecture of St. Petersburg. Moscow, in Nikolai II's mind, endured not just as the place of his coronation but also as a spiritual hub, an authentic first capital of the land over which he was placed to rule. He became the first tsar in many decades to visit Moscow regularly every Easter. "After 1906, when St.

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<sup>93</sup> David Barclay's *Frederick William IV and the Prussian Monarchy 1840-1861* (1995).

<sup>94</sup> David Barclay, "Representing the Middle Ages: Court Festivals in Nineteenth-Century Prussia," in *Medievalism in the Modern World. Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman (Making the Middle Ages I)*, eds. Richard Utz, Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 108.

<sup>95</sup> Königsberg (1255-1946), Kaliningrad (1946-present).

<sup>96</sup> Barclay, 115.

Petersburg became the seat of the Duma,” writes Figes. “[Nikolai II] looked even more towards Moscow and the provinces as a base on which to build his ‘popular autocracy’ as a rival to the parliament.”<sup>97</sup>



*Figure 6: The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood, ca. 1900s.*

The desire to change the country architecturally became a torch passed from father to son.<sup>98</sup> Nikolai II continued restoring Byzantine traditions in architecture with a passion. For example, the Fedorov Village at Tsarskoye Selo was transformed during his reign into a “sort of Muscovite theme park.”<sup>99</sup> Despite their anti-western purposes, these architectural projects were in fact largely an iteration of a Western phenomenon that gained prominence in nineteenth-century Europe.

Friedrich Wilhelm IV, too, nurtured a dream of restoring his country’s chivalric past through its architecture by reintroducing the Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles common to Medieval Europe. A talented artist himself, the king drew “architectural visions and

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<sup>97</sup> Figes, 9.

<sup>98</sup> See “Building Muscovite Churches,” in Wortman, 244-256.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

dreamy drafts”<sup>100</sup> that range from depictions of knights and Christological and allegorical figures to sketches of palaces, monasteries, churches, cathedrals, memorials, and other architectural objects, all evidence of his fascination with his country’s history.<sup>101</sup> He is best remembered for the completion of the Cologne Cathedral, where “medieval” festivals took place in 1842, 1848, and 1855. The festival of 1848, dedicated to the sixcentenary of the foundation of the Cologne Cathedral in 1248, took place shortly after the so-called Spring of Nations and became one of many magnificent restorations. The press compared the festival at the Roman Catholic cathedral in Cologne to the national assembly’s meeting at St. Paul’s Church in Frankfurt am Main, with both celebrating German history and unity. The comparison elicited criticism from none other than Vasilii Zhukovskii, the celebrated Russian poet and teacher of Aleksandr II who resided in Europe. In the poet’s eyes, a revered medieval relic at Cologne carried more weight and dignity than a recent parliamentary gathering at a Lutheran church. “[Cologne Cathedral] is the completion of what once existed, while [St. Paul’s Church] is a new creation,” wrote Zhukovskii. “[Cologne Cathedral] is an ancient building, created in ancient times with its character preserved [...]; as for [St. Paul’s Church] everything that is of the past or was created during many centuries must give way to the new ideas of new builders.”<sup>102</sup> A historian and devout monarchist, Zhukovskii emphasizes how one cannot expect to recreate the past, including customs, by fusing it with a modern sensibility.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> “Vergangene Visionen aus der Feder von Friedrich Wilhelm IV.” <https://uclab.fh-potsdam.de/fw4/> (accessed January 3, 2017).

<sup>101</sup> Among the buildings restored or built during his rule were a number of churches, cathedrals (Magdeburg, Naumburg, Halberstadt), and castles (Marienburg, Stolzenfels, Hohenzollern).

<sup>102</sup> Vasilii Zhukovskii, *Sochineniia v proze*, vol. 6 (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1869), 406. Original italics.

<sup>103</sup> Zhukovskii goes on to illustrate the infeasibility of the king’s “monarchical project” of reenacting history to foster the “emotionally nourishing relationship between monarchy and people” (Giloi, 122). In contrast, the poet



Figure 7: One of Friedrich Wilhelm IV's many sketches of Prussia's Cologne Cathedral from 1842.



Figure 8: Cologne Cathedral in 1842.

Two albums — “The Album of the White Rose” that consisted of drawings put together by Adolph Menzel twenty-five years after the eponymous knightly tournament<sup>104</sup> and the album

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presents Nikolai I as an example of the ideal monarch with the divine right to govern and praises him for not committing a *faux pas* by ceding to popular demands as did his Prussian counterpart, which led to the creation of an assembly that symbolized the people’s power and lessened his own.

<sup>104</sup> “The ‘White Rose’ Album,” in “Fine Arts,” *Public Opinion* 1, 110 (December 1882): 883.

of photographs<sup>105</sup> from the costume ball of 1903 — were produced to honor these occasions.



Figure 9: *Entrance of the Knights at Festival “The Magic of the White Rose”* by Adolph von Menzel for the festival of the White Rose in 1829.

The Russian collection resembles another album<sup>106</sup> that was put together after the Devonshire House Ball where the selection of photographs similarly showcases the principal “actors” in their roles. The Russian “actors” are posed individually in full attire with each person’s name, character’s name (if applicable), and medieval rank printed next to the photograph. The photograph of Nikolai II as his favorite of the Romanovs, Aleksei Mikhailovich, became the first authorized image of the tsar in medieval dress that was printed and distributed. To appear convincing in their performances as medieval characters, the tsar and other participants were photographed against a background of antique furniture, carpets, curtains, and paintings, all of which attempted to replicate a medieval atmosphere in the improvised setting. Their performances hence extended beyond the ballrooms of the Winter Palace. The members of this Russian twentieth-century court, dressed to look like seventeenth-century figures, posed in

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<sup>105</sup> *Al'bom kostiumirovannogo bala v Zimnem dvortse v fevrale 1903 g. / Album du bal costumé au Palais d'Hiver. Février 1903.*

<sup>106</sup> *Devonshire House Fancy Dress Ball, July 2, 1897: a Collection of Portraits in Costume of Some of the Guests* (1899).

character for an album of photographs, which was a nineteenth-century medium. To be sure, neither of these recreations — the costume ball or the album — succeeded in re-creating the medieval “real”.

The historical comparison of Russian and Prussian rulers and their courts illuminates a number of similarities in the political methods of governing their respective states. Both were conservative politicians who wanted to be regarded as progressives. Both had to compromise in sharing power with legislative assemblies, but once they felt that their positions were secured, both rushed to reclaim their authority by dispersing those assemblies. Both lacked popularity, feared assassinations, and had to abdicate in favor of their relatives. Both looked back to their countries’ medieval pasts as a solution for the future. More importantly, both dealt with countries that were in a state of crisis. The reenactment of historical times was, for Friedrich Wilhelm IV, an indirect participation in an extravagant fantasy of medieval knighthood. For Nikolai II, it was a form of nostalgia for the times when the tsar and his court took part in ceremonial hunts. The appeal of those recreations was in the value of community it created, which, at least, temporarily offered a chance for the monarchs to distance themselves from the issues of the day. The reality, however, unveiled the façade of these courtly performances and unmasked the Prussian king and the Russian tsar as individuals who craved the attention and adoration that an all-powerful monarch would have, but not the responsibility of absolute power. These ritualized reenactments in the Russian and Prussian courts thus functioned as cultural performances and critiques of a contemporary society, which they hoped to invigorate with a spirit of renewal.

#### 4. *The Eastern Journey of Grand Duke Nikolai*

During his travels through the Russian Empire, Marquis de Custine once observed that “the task of the Russians is to translate European civilization to the Asiatics.”<sup>107</sup> Such a perception of the Russian Empire as an intermediary between Europe and Asia was prevalent among foreigners throughout the nineteenth century. Take Rudyard Kipling, for example, who writes in 1899: “A Russian is a delightful person till he tucks his shirt in. As an Oriental he is charming. It is only when he insists upon being treated as the most easterly of Western peoples, instead of the most westerly of Easterns, that he becomes a racial anomaly extremely difficult to handle.”<sup>108</sup> The empire’s geographical locale, straddling Europe and Asia, made it convenient to think of the country as a link between East and West. Nikolai II and his father neither disputed nor encouraged this perception. They did, however, send a message to the rest of the world that the Russian Empire envisioned its future in the East. Before his appearance as a falconer at the ball of 1894 and long before his role as Aleksei Mikhailovich at the ball of 1903, Nikolai II participated in an enterprise that became known as the grand duke’s journey to the Orient, which spanned nine months from October 1890 to August 1891.<sup>109</sup> The journey was made by land and sea — via the cruiser, *Memory of Azov* — with stops in Greece, Egypt, India, Siam, and Japan. The trip came to an abrupt end in Japan after “the Otsu incident,” when a deranged policeman attacked Nikolai II with a saber just outside of Kyoto. Having survived this assassination attempt, the grand duke proceeded to Vladivostok for the inauguration of the eastern stretch of the Trans-Siberian rail line and headed home through Siberia. Nikolai II was not the first heir to

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<sup>107</sup> Custine, 598.

<sup>108</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Selected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier & Son, 1900), 151.

<sup>109</sup> Esper Ukhtomskii’s *Grand Duke Nicholas’ Journey to the East* [Puteshestvie na Vostok Ego Imperatorskogo Vysochestva Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha, 1890-1891] (1893-1897).

travel to the Far East. These journeys, which often included both Europe and the Orient, had long become a staple of foreign policy education for the grand dukes during the nineteenth century ever since Peter I's Grand Embassy to Western Europe in 1697-1698. Nikolai II's journey did, however, come at a time when the world was anticipating the empire to rid itself of medieval fanaticism and embrace modernity. The heir's adventure instead carried ideological significance by taking place far away from the "graveyard" of Europe.

"Owner of the Russian lands,"<sup>110</sup> is how Nikolai II identified his occupation in the country's first census, conducted in 1897. The tone and message are cardinally different if compared, for example, with Queen Victoria's response to the "occupation" column of the British census that was left blank in 1841 and entered as "The Queen" in 1851. The Russian monarch's response recognized his role as more than just the head of the Russian state, more than an emperor, but as the sole and lawful owner of all Russian territories. Such perception of tsar as the owner (государь-хозяин) of the state was common to the medieval rulers and formed another parallel between Nikolai II and Aleksei Mikhailovich. Like his father, Nikolai II blamed the political reforms of Peter I for the revolutionary revolts that overwhelmed the country in the nineteenth century. "[Peter I] is the ancestor who appeals to me least of all. He had too much admiration for European 'culture,'" Mosolov recalled the tsar saying. "He stamped out Russian habits, the good customs of his sires, the usages bequeathed by the nation, on too many occasions."<sup>111</sup> Nikolai II regarded the Decembrist uprising of 1825 and the assassination of Aleksandr II in 1881 to be direct outcomes of Peter I's politics in the previous century, which had swayed Rus' from its original course. It is in this sense, then, that many of Nikolai II's

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<sup>110</sup> The original text reads: "Хозяин земли русской."

<sup>111</sup> Mosolov, 16.

beliefs about Aleksei Mikhailovich, which appear in the memoirs of his contemporaries, had been formed not in relation to what his ancestor managed to accomplish but to what his ancestor's legendary son managed to destroy.

It would be incorrect, however, to refer to Nikolai II as the only high-profile admirer of Aleksei Mikhailovich, who was nicknamed “The Quietest” (Тишайший) supposedly for his pious and devout character. “I am inclined to regard [Aleksei Mikhailovich] as the best person of Medieval Rus’,”<sup>112</sup> writes historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii. After Ivan Groznyi's legacy of massacres and oppression, a succession of impostors, and years of economic hardships, the second of the Romanovs succeeded in leaving the legacy of a tsar who exercised full control of the state. Despite the relative tranquility of Aleksei Mikhailovich's first years on the Muscovite throne, his reign could hardly be considered peaceful or quiet. His politics, in fact, contributed to the seventeenth century entering history as a century of riots (бунташный век).<sup>113</sup> Nikolai II correctly discerned his ancestor for whom religious and secular ceremonies were of utmost importance. For example, Palm Sunday is often described as one of the most elaborate church rituals in seventeenth-century Muscovy.<sup>114</sup> Falconry, on the other hand, was well-known to be among the most beloved secular pastimes of the Muscovite tsar.<sup>115</sup> Russian theater scholars have

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<sup>112</sup> Vasilii Kliuchevskii, *Russkaia istoriia*, book 2, lectures XLIV-LXXXVI (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2002), 210.

<sup>113</sup> High profile conflicts included two international wars: one with Poland (1654-1667), during which the Treaty of Pereyaslav (1654) with Bohdan Khmel'nitskyi brought the Cossack Hetmanate of Left-Bank Ukraine under the control of Muscovy, and another with Sweden (1656–1658). A number of internal and violent rebellions, which were economically motivated, took place throughout Muscovy, and many of those were put down with brutal violence. The Cossack revolt of Sten'ka Razin (1670-1671) was the best known among them. The schism (раскол) in the Russian Orthodox Church, which occurred as a result of protests to Patriarch Nikon's 1653 reforms, added political pressure and had a lasting effect on the country for centuries to come.

<sup>114</sup> Michael S. Flier, “Breaking the Code: The Image of the Tsar in the Muscovite Palm Sunday Ritual,” in *Medieval Russian Culture*, vol. 2, ed. Michael S. Flier and Daniel Rowland (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 213–242.

<sup>115</sup> The courtiers employed falcons to hunt geese, ducks, quails, and other small animals, presented an intricate and complex performance that required skill and preparation. A special guide *The Regulations of Falconry* [Uriadnik

pointed out, for instance, that Aleksei Mikhailovich was able to sit through the ten hours of the play *The Comedy of Artaxerxes* [Artakserksovo deistvo] (1672) simply because he was accustomed to elaborate daily rituals that required an extended time to complete. Among Nikolai II's many misconceptions of Aleksei Mikhailovich, the one, which presented him as a monarch who resisted any Western innovation was perhaps the most egregious. "With one foot still resting firmly against his native Orthodox past and the other already swung over the divide, so did [Aleksei Mikhailovich] remain in this indecisive transitional position,"<sup>116</sup> writes Kliuchevskii. In addition to the well-known church reforms, Aleksei Mikhailovich's regulation to the access of the foreign press, the order to establish the first theater, and the founding of a "New German quarter" (Новая немецкая слобода) in Moscow are the outcomes of a progressive mind that envisioned Russia as a Western-style state. In setting out to imitate the second Romanov ruler, Nikolai II strived for "a model of an ethnically and religiously united people, ruled by an Orthodox tsar."<sup>117</sup> Perhaps it was a lack of historical knowledge that led to his failure to realize that the reign of his medieval ancestor was also a time of transition that transformed a number of old institutions and secured the foundation for the even more radical reforms of his ruthless son.

"Tsar, tsarina, boyars, nobility, the upper clergy, servants and others would become the prisoners of their own ceremonial roles, which were known to everyone at the court and were

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sokol'nich'ego puti] (1656) detailing each step of this activity was put together with the tsar's active involvement. This handbook functioned like a medieval script for Alexei Mikhailovich and his courtiers during these carefully planned outings. *Regulations* outlined a dress code, a designated chamber where the initiation took place, proper seating arrangements prior to the hunt, and other important procedures. It also included scripted speeches with the names of real courtiers who participated in the ritual. For more examples, see *A Collection of Letters of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich* [Sobranie pisem tsaria Alekseia Mikhailovicha] (1856) ed. Petr Bartenev.

<sup>116</sup> Kliuchevskii, 205.

<sup>117</sup> Wortman, 237.

learned to perfection,”<sup>118</sup> is how historians describe the culture of Aleksei Mikhailovich’s court that Nikolai II strove to emulate. Since the notion of *role-play* had been built into the fabric of the imperial ritual from its inception, each day in the life of the twentieth-century court was in itself a performance where everyone played his or her part according to the script. As such, the main attraction of this ritualized culture with its complex codex of behavior was that it discouraged surprises. The longing for the past to return (whether this past ever existed) is a condition which Svetlana Boym identifies as *restorative* nostalgia. “The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot,” writes Boym. “Restorative nostalgia ends up reconstructing emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time.”<sup>119</sup> Having inherited his father’s affection for the Middle Ages, Nikolai II gravitated toward those people in his circles who shared this kind of nostalgia, which led the “emblems” and “rituals” of the past already encoded in courtly life to emerge in the most bizarre ways.

##### 5. *Dmitrii Sipiagin, the First Boyar*

Interior Minister Dmitrii Sipiagin was one of the senior advisors to the tsar and among the most ardent admirers of the Russian medieval past who would have appreciated the exquisite occasion of the February ball of 1903, had he not been murdered by a terrorist in 1902. His official residence at St. Petersburg, where he received the emperor, was even decorated in the style of medieval Rus’.<sup>120</sup> According to Nikolai II’s secretary, Sergei Kryzhanovskii, one of the

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<sup>118</sup> Andrei Robinson, eds., *Pervye p’esy russkogo teatra*, vol. 1 of *Ranniaia russkaia dramaturgiia (XVII-pervoi poloviny XVIII v.)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), 51.

<sup>119</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 49.

<sup>120</sup> Reportedly, Sipiagin’s dining room bore a variant of the following inscription in archaic Russian: “In the year of God’s Word 1898<sup>th</sup> this dining chamber was established by boyar Dmitrii Sergeevich Sipiagin and his boiarynia Aleksandra Pavlovna.” (Letter, N. Sultanov to D. Sipiagin, October 20, 1898, fond 721, opis’ 2, delo 450, Plany, scheta, smety, raschety i dr. raboty po remontu i oborudovsniiu doma D.S. Sipiagina, RGIA, St. Petersburg.)

paintings that hung in Sipiagin's residence was that of the coronation of Mikhail Fedorovich.<sup>121</sup> “[Sipiagin]’s ideal was the age of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich and his chief dream was to become ‘the closest boyar’ of the tsar, an intermediary between the country and the monarch, the tsar’s closest adviser,”<sup>122</sup> remembers Kryzhanovskii.



Figure 10: Dmitrii Sipiagin.

With Sipiagin's affection for the Middle Ages well-known, those in his circles played off this passion in order to please the minister, who had influence on the tsar. Sipiagin himself did not shy away from performing various medieval rituals in public. During his journey to the Yaroslavl region, for example, the minister would lie on his back in the churchyard in Rostov Velikii, as supposedly the ancient custom prescribed, to better hear the sound of the famed church bells (малиновый звон).<sup>123</sup> With everyone aware of Sipiagin's medieval obsessions, the

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<sup>121</sup> Sergei Kryzhanovskii, *Vospominaniia: iz bumag S.E. Kryzhanovskogo, poslednego gosudarstvennogo sekretaria Rossiiskoi imperii* (St. Petersburg: Rossiiskaia natsional'naia biblioteka, 2009), 168.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

minister was the only person who did not know that he was being shown a “Potemkin village” on this journey, which, as Kryzhanovskii reflects, was scrupulously organized, from the dinner at the *terem* of the Rostov princes to sailing down the river to the coordinated hurrahs of *muzhiks*. “We sailed down some river in boats covered with carpets while listening to the explanations of the local archaeologists [...] telling us about the distant past of Rostov,” writes Kryzhanovskii. “The boat would turn, and a picturesque meadow would emerge from behind a wall of reeds where three shepherd boys would be playing old tunes on their flutes. Sipiagin is delighted. Another turn and another meadow, with a group of shepherds playing something on the horns.”<sup>124</sup> This journey possessed all the characteristics of a boyar’s pilgrimage, paying homage to Russia’s past. As the main boyar who bestowed his presence on this provincial place, Sipiagin visited the churches and communicated with the locals. A decade later, Nikolai II’s own journey down the Volga River in observance of the tercentenary festivities would curiously emulate Sipiagin’s.

Sipiagin’s obsessions with seventeenth-century Muscovy is remembered, however, for the bizarre role-playing that supposedly took place at the minister’s residence. To Nikolai II’s “Alekssei Mikhailovich,” Sipiagin “played” Boris Morozov, the tutor to the monarch during his formative years. “[Sipiagin] received the Emperor [Nikolai II] with all the rites observed at the Muscovite Court of the seventeenth century,” remembers Aleksandr Izvol’skii, Nikolai II’s minister of foreign affairs. “Again at this performance the Emperor played the part of [Alekssei Mikhailovich], and [Sipiagin] appeared as the [Boyar Morozov], the all-powerful Minister of the Czar.”<sup>125</sup> Like Nikolai II, who did not know of or chose not to acknowledge Alekssei

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>125</sup> Alexander Iswolsky, *The Memoirs of Alexander Iswolsky: Formerly Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to France*, trans. Charles Louis Seeger (Gulf Breeze: Academic International Press, 1974), 265.

Mikhailovich's western inclinations, so too did Sipiagin misconstrue the image of Boyar Morozov. History depicts the first boyar as a paternal figure to the young tsar, an intelligent and shrewd man, who managed the needs of the state at least at the beginning of Aleksei's reign.<sup>126</sup> As first advisor to the tsar until the Moscow Uprising of 1648, which went down in history as the Salt Riot (Соляной бунт) and nearly cost the first boyar his life, Morozov was treated with respect even after losing his political influence.



*Figure 11: Tsar's boyar Boris Morozov (right) on Konstantin Makovskii's *The Kissing Ritual (At the Feast of Boyar Morozov)* [Potseluinyi obriad (Pir u boiarina Morozova)] (1895).*

Quite clearly, Sipiagin built on this portrait of the medieval tsar's counselor, either unaware of or choosing to overlook the fact that Morozov was, in fact, according to Kliuchevskii, one of the first westernizers. “[Morozov] introduced the visual arts into the curriculum of [young Aleksei] and acquainted him with some subjects by way of German engraved pictures,” writes Kliuchevskii. “He also introduced an even more bold novelty to the Muscovite palace by dressing Aleksei and his brother in German dress.”<sup>127</sup> The strange role-play thus involved two

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<sup>126</sup> Sergei Solov'ev, “Tsarstvovanie Alekseia Mikhailovicha,” in *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishykh vremen*, vol. 6-10, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1896), 1491-1492.

<sup>127</sup> Kliuchevskii, 206.

twentieth-century figures, dressed as a medieval tsar and his boyar, who discussed the political matters of the early 1900s in a residence in St. Petersburg that had been decorated to resemble the ancient chamber of a Muscovite palace.

6. *The Canonization of Serafim of Sarov*

“[We] drove into the Sarov monastery,” reads Nikolai II’s diary entry from July 17 (30), 1903. “There was a special feeling as we entered the Assumption Cathedral and the church of Ss. Zosima and Savvatii, where we had the honor of kissing the relics of the Holy Father Serafim.”<sup>128</sup> The preparations for this event — the canonization of Serafim of Sarov (1754-1833), which took place in July 1903 — were almost a year in the making. Since ritualization is already built into the structure of divine services, the canonization in Sarov was in many ways pre-choreographed. The decision to support the canonization of Serafim not only strengthened the tsar’s devotion to the church but also emphasized his deeply religious upbringing, which other members of his family shared. His brother-in-law Sandro, for example, referred to the practice of paying respects to the tombs of the saints buried in the Kremlin as “the official duty of every member of the imperial family passing through the ancient capital.”<sup>129</sup> This is how he remembered the childhood experience of visiting the tombs for the first time: “[We] had to kiss the brownish foreheads of numerous saints lying in state in silver coffins and wrapped in luxurious silver-and-gold tissues. An elderly monk dressed in black escorted us from coffin to coffin, raising their lids and pointing to us the exact spot we were expected to kiss.”<sup>130</sup> It seems that the last Russian tsar truly believed in his divine appointment. Like Aleksei Mikhailovich,

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<sup>128</sup> Mironenko, vol. 1, 740.

<sup>129</sup> Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia, 37.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

who often referred to his governing mission as “God’s work” (Божье дело) or “God’s service” (Божья служба), Nikolai II recognized his mission of showing his devotion to God long before the influence of various mystics at the court became paramount. For example, he traced the decision for Count Witte’s sudden dismissal from his position as the head of the Council of Ministers (the Western equivalent of Prime Minister) to divine intervention he experienced during a *Te Deum* service. “The Lord put into my heart the thought that I must not delay that which I was already persuaded to do,”<sup>131</sup> Nikolai II reportedly said.

“In 1902 and 1903 [Nikolai II] and [Aleksandra] began to look to the Russian people for examples of piety and sources of religious inspiration,” notes Wortman. “Their quest for a personal mystical faith was in part a result of their longing for the birth of a son, in part a response to [Aleksandra]’s reading of mystical texts and the lives of Russian saints in these years.”<sup>132</sup> Their efforts resulted in one of the most medieval-themed ceremonies of Nikolai II’s years in power, the canonization of a Russian *starets* who lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The significance of this event cannot be understated. This was the second of seven canonizations performed by the Holy Synod during Nikolai II’s reign,<sup>133</sup> a considerable increase compared to only three<sup>134</sup> canonizations that took place during the entire nineteenth century:

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<sup>131</sup> Vladimir Gurko, *Features and Figures of the Past. Government and Opinion in the Reign of Nicholas II*, trans. Laura Matveev (New York: Russell and Russell, 1939), 225.

<sup>132</sup> Wortman, 383.

<sup>133</sup> (1) Saint Theodosius of Chernigov (in 1896); (2) Saint Serafim of Sarov (in 1903); (3) Saint Anna of Kashin (canonized in 1649, de-canonized in 1677 due to her veneration by the Old Believers, and glorified for the second time in 1909); (4) Saint Joasaph of Belgorod (in 1911); (5) The Priest Martyr Hermogenes (Germogen), Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’ (in 1913); (6) St. Pitirim of Tambov (1914); (7) Saint John (Maksimovich) of Tobolsk (1916).

<sup>134</sup> St. Innocent of Irkutsk (1804), St. Mitrophan of Voronezh (1832), and St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1861).

none during Aleksandr III's reign, one during Aleksandr II's, one during Nikolai I's, and one during Aleksandr I's.<sup>135</sup>



Figure 12: Nikolai II (front) is carrying the relics.

“Thousands and thousands of peasants had crowded along the whole length of the mail route to Sarov, well before the Imperial procession started,” writes Mosolov, “five hundred thousand peasants, from all over Russia, had swarmed into the neighborhood of the monastery.”<sup>136</sup> Nikolai II used the event as an opportunity to reconnect with the people, 150,000 of whom flocked to Sarov for the occasion. “The people were touching and kept in surprising order,”<sup>137</sup> Nikolai II remembered. The ceremony included the veneration of the relics, swimming in cold water that supposedly bore miraculous properties, carrying the relics in a coffin, and conversing with the locals, among whom there were many deformed, invalids, and fools in Christ (юродивые). “At this moment,” remembered Mosolov, “in the midst of a crowd that virtually swallowed him, had there appeared beneath the tsar a tall stallion that raised him above this crowd, the tsar’s one

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<sup>135</sup> Evgenii Golubinskii's *History of the Canonization of Saints in the Russian Church* [Istoriia kanonizatsii sviatykh v russkoi tserkvi] (1903).

<sup>136</sup> Mosolov, 133.

<sup>137</sup> Mironenko, vol. 1, 741.

word or one hand gesture would have led these hundreds of thousands of people to death or victory.”<sup>138</sup> The success of the ceremony in Sarov convinced Nikolai II in the people’s devotion to him and his family.

### 7. *The First Duma*

In a society that enjoyed celebrating important milestones, the question of whether certain ceremonial procedures were always appropriate was rarely considered. If an entirely new event was scheduled, it still followed the existing protocol employed at other courtly functions. The opening of the first State Duma on April 27 (May 10), 1906 at St. George’s Hall of the Winter Palace became another medieval performance of Nikolai II’s reign and was clearly illustrative of the clash that was pointed out by the foreign observers. “Russia has her parliament at last,” announced one American reporter. “The [Duma] was opened May 10 with a speech by the czar who came before the elected representatives of his people surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance of a medieval monarch.”<sup>139</sup> The purpose of this legislative body, which was first introduced by Nikolai II in the October Manifesto of 1905, was to divide power between the emperor and representatives of the people, with the tsar retaining the power to veto any laws passed by this assembly. “No ceremony of this kind ever having taken place before, it was all a little vague, and many of the actors were not sure of their parts,”<sup>140</sup> the tsar’s first cousin, Grand Duchess Mariia Pavlovna, remembered the occasion. Indeed, the “actors” who showed up for the

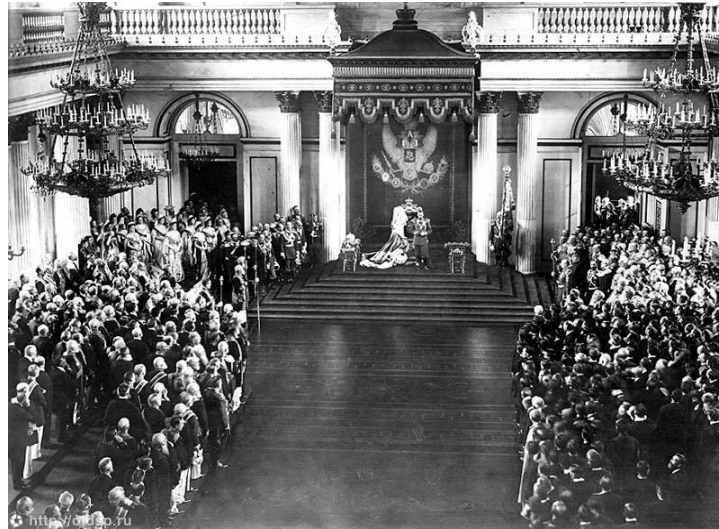
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<sup>138</sup> The original text reads: “Я утверждаю, что если бы в густой толпе, которая чуть ли не задавила государя, вырос под ним из земли высокий конь, возвышающий его над народом, то царь одним возгласом, одним повелительным мановением руки мог повести эти сотни тысяч людей на верную смерть или на какую угодно победу.” [Aleksandr Mosolov, *Pri dvore imperatora* (Riga: Filin, 1938), 104-105.]

<sup>139</sup> “Russia’s First Parliament,” in “The Weekly Round-up,” *Public Opinion* 20 (May 1906): 611.

<sup>140</sup> Marie Pavlovna, Grand Duchess of Russia, *Education of a Princess* (New York: Viking Press, 1930), 84.

event had to improvise at the opening ceremony of the organization that indirectly labeled the absolute monarchy outdated and ineffective.



*Figure 13: The opening of the First Duma.*

Maurice Paléologue, a French attaché in the Russian Empire during 1914-1917, would later recall Nikolai II's pale face during the session of the first Duma. "Everyone thought he was going to faint, so tortured and cadaverous were his features,"<sup>141</sup> writes Paléologue. Those closest to the tsar explained that Nikolai II feared an assassination attempt on the day of the Duma's opening but proceeded with the ceremony in the grandiose fashion to which he and everyone at the court was accustomed. Many sensed the awkwardness of forcing this state occasion to follow the expected ceremonial practices, whereas others failed to recognize the deceptive nature of the performance. "On the day of the assembly the Winter Palace looked more like a fortress," informs us Grand Duchess Mariia Pavlovna, "so greatly did [the imperial family] fear an attack of hostile demonstrations."<sup>142</sup> Vladimir Gurko, assistant minister of the interior, pointed out the contrast in the appearances between the aristocracy and common people on that day. "Naively

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<sup>141</sup> Maurice Paléologue, *An Ambassador's Memoirs*, vol. 2, trans. F.A. Holt (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1925), 187.

<sup>142</sup> Marie Pavlovna, Grand Duchess of Russia, 84.

believing that the people's representatives, many of whom were peasants, would be awed by the splendor of the Imperial court, the ladies of the Imperial family [...] were literally covered with pearls and diamonds," he writes. "But the effect was altogether different. This Oriental method of impressing upon spectators a reverence for the bearers of supreme power was quite unsuited to the occasion."<sup>143</sup> The ceremony thus still promoted a tsar who agreed to have a dialogue with his people rather than one who was forced to concede to their demands. It also aimed to reinforce a sense of tradition and order in a country that was heading toward the catastrophe.

From Nikolai II's perspective, the agreement to establish a Duma was one of the failures of his administration, which he blamed on Witte. "I have never seen such a chameleon of a man," wrote Nikolai II to his mother. "*As long as I live, I will never trust [him] again with the smallest thing. I had quite enough with last year's experiment. It is still like a nightmare to me.*"<sup>144</sup> The "experiment" indeed failed miserably due Nikolai II's misconstruing the function of this latest government body and treating it more like the Boyar Duma (Боярская дума<sup>145</sup>) of the Middle Ages — a so-called flywheel (маховое колесо) as Kliuchevskii referred to it — than a modern parliamentary institution. Nikolai II did not recognize that this newly created council had the power to challenge his decisions and reacted against it. The First Duma was dissolved on July 8 (21) 1906, exactly 73 days after its well-publicized opening. Conflicts between Nikolai II and the First Duma continued during the course of the next year and led to the arrest of 169 members, who were charged with treason. The Second Duma lasted for 103 days, and it was only the Third Duma, which opened in November 1907, that operated for several years (until

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<sup>143</sup> Gurko, 470.

<sup>144</sup> Bing, 212 and 221. Original italics.

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, Vasilii Kliuchevskii's *The Boyar Duma of Medieval Rus'* [Boiarskaia дума Drevnei Rusi] (1881).

1912). For a country that was heavily destabilized by political disturbances, the day of the First Duma's opening resembled "a shadow play in which [Nikolai II] still remained autocrat"<sup>146</sup> or, perhaps, a play in a foreign language.

#### 8. *Tercentenary, the Final Act*

The celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of Romanov rule in 1913, which has survived in photographs and film, became the imperial family's final medieval tribute to the dynasty. By 1913 there was nothing but nostalgia left as the empire had already begun its descent into chaos. The firing of a cannon at the Peter and Paul Fortress commenced festivities on February 21 (March 6), declaring the day a national holiday. In the morning, the imperial family arrived for service at the Kazan Cathedral, and in the evening, they attended Mikhail Glinka's opera *A Life for the Tsar* [*Zhizn' za tsaria*] (1836) at the Mariinskii Theater. The story of Ivan Susanin, a peasant who perished saving the life of the first Romanov tsar by leading enemy troops into swamps, served as an example of patriotism and self-sacrifice in the name of the monarchy. This tale about the savvy serf supported the myth, supposedly shared, of the bond between the tsar and his people, who were ready to die for him. A special committee was assembled to coordinate the festivities, with the agenda of enforcing the image of the tsar as a divinely-appointed father to his people. On the special day, Nikolai II issued a manifesto, a large portion of which recalled the past Romanov glory and called for the nation to unite. This latest document, however, fell short of the public's expectations: although the tsar granted amnesty to the participants of the revolution of 1905, he failed to mention any future reforms. Nikolai II

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<sup>146</sup> King, 304.

personally edited the manifesto to present himself as the only source of authority by removing all references to the State Duma.<sup>147</sup>

In preparation for the event, the press focused on embellishing the history behind the choice of a sixteen-year-old Mikhail Romanov for the throne of Muscovy. *Niva*, a popular St. Petersburg weekly, devoted an entire issue to the anniversary. The photograph of the Trinity Cathedral at the Ipatiev Monastery in Kostroma — the place where Mikhail Romanov stayed in 1613 where the Zemskii Sobor announced him as the new Russian tsar — graced the magazine's cover. The edition represented a tribute to Kostroma, using photographs to portray the province as the cradle of the Romanov dynasty; to a lesser degree they did the same for Moscow. Without mentioning the complex political intrigues that went on behind the scenes, *Niva* promoted the election of the Russian tsar as the unanimous decision of all Russian people.<sup>148</sup> The story legitimized Mikhail's election, reviewed his ancestry in relation to the Rurik dynasty, and emphasized his relatability to the common folk through the misfortunes that various members of his family endured. The piece was replete with dramatic passages like the following outburst, which was intended to relay Mikhail's supposed hesitancy in accepting the responsibility to rule:

Have it your way! We will leave for Moscow to tell those who sent us that you rejected our tears and pleas. Suffer, o Russian land! Rise, not so distant anarchy! Let the people weep again, and let disgrace befall the churches! Before this holy icon I implore you, Mikhail: from now on the misery of our homeland will be your fault.<sup>149</sup>

If *Niva*, at least, attempted an entertaining (albeit ahistorical) version of Mikhail's reluctant acceptance, state newspapers were driven by a strict political agenda to restate, reassert, and remind people who was in charge. For example, *Moskovskie vedomosti* presented their version of

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>148</sup> Boris Nikonov, "Tri veka tomu nazad. (1613-1913)," *Niva* 7 (February 1913): 129.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 134.

Mikhail's accession in its anniversary edition that programmatically stressed Mikhail's divine appointment, absolute power, and the nation's direct involvement in the decision to elect him. The article underscored and prioritized the three pillars of Russia's ideological doctrine. "[Nikolai II] received his power as a service *from God* and became answerable to God. The tsar [...] must be obeyed like God is obeyed," the article stated. "[Russians] recognize the tsar not because he was chosen by the people, but because God chose him."<sup>150</sup> *Moskovskie vedomosti* knew exactly what kind of message the regime wanted to propagate and even italicized the key words that had all but lost their relevance by 1913: "The tsar was awarded the *unlimited, autocratic, supreme power of the national ideal*."<sup>151</sup> Like Nikolai II's *Tercentenary Manifesto*, this piece of political propaganda also dismissed the role of the State Duma and portrayed the role of the Romanovs, including the latest tsar, in a sacrificial light.



Figure 14: The commemorative medal (front and back) with the etchings of Nikolai II and Mikhail Fedorovich.

As a painful reminder of Nikolai II's inadequacy as an absolute monarch, the existence of the State Duma both weakened the tsar's power and enabled a dangerous game of self-deception.

<sup>150</sup> "Podvig narodnogo samosoznaniia," *Moskovskie vedomosti*, February 21 (March 6), 1913. Original italics.

<sup>151</sup> The original text reads: "Царю была вручена *неограниченная, самодержавная, верховная власть всенародного идеала*." Original italics.

With the anniversary celebrations reviving imperial hopes for the absolute power of his ancestors, Nikolai II continued acting as a “constitutional autocrat” in his reluctance to share power with the people.<sup>152</sup> Despite being pushed to adapt a Western political model, Russia kept suffering setbacks. “There was, in short, a widening gulf of mistrust not just between the court and society,” writes Wortman, “but also between the court and many of its own traditional supporters in the Civil Service, the Church and the army, as the Tsar resisted their own demands for reform.”<sup>153</sup> By 1913, even Nikolai II’s supporters questioned the effectiveness in the division of power between the crown and state. Tensions in the capital and the growing dissatisfaction of the masses further destabilized an already fragile political situation. Two years after the assassination of Stolypin and after years of severe political reaction, the country resembled a volcano presided over by a tsar who “lacked the intelligence and character to rule yet insisted on playing the autocrat.”<sup>154</sup>

The anniversary festivities, therefore, provided a welcome distraction for the imperial court, a sort of a feast during the plague, and an opportunity for another ill-timed performance. The celebrations resumed in May with the family beginning their pilgrimage down the Volga River in a recreation of Mikhail Romanov’s historic journey.<sup>155</sup> Nikolai II chronicled the voyage in his diary and seemed excited at the prospect of leaving St. Petersburg, a place where he felt a palpable disconnect and lack of popularity with the public. He was pleased to see the peasants

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<sup>152</sup> Pipes, 44.

<sup>153</sup> Figes, 13.

<sup>154</sup> Pipes, 57.

<sup>155</sup> Special literature was published to magnify the importance of the event, including regional literature. Yaroslavl Region printed a brochure that detailed the imperial visit. See *Prebyvanie Ikh Imperatorskikh Velichestv v Iaroslavskoi gubernii v leto 1913 mesiatza maia v 21-23 den'* (1913).

leaving their villages<sup>156</sup> near Suzdal to greet him, walking onto the riverbanks,<sup>157</sup> and lining up in the water<sup>158</sup> to get a glimpse of their tsar. Church bells, firework displays, singing of the national anthem and Russian folk songs accompanied the joyous reception in the provinces. According to Nikolai II's sister, some peasants even fell to their knees to kiss the emperor's shadow.<sup>159</sup> This magnificent performance, which was largely due to the organizational efforts of the tercentenary committee, sustained the myth of the almighty ruler revered by his subjects. While sailing down the Volga to Kostroma — on boats with one appropriately named *Tsar' Mikhail Fedorovich* and another *Mezhen'* (“low tide”) — and toward a future that could not have been more uncertain, Nikolai II emulated various elements of his ancestor's journey. He visited the ancient churches of Suzdal, participated in a cross-procession in Nizhny Novgorod, met with officials, visited holy sites, and attended religious services. “Such splendor, such dazzling pageantry [...] but to me it all seemed unreal and forced,” Grand Duchess Ol'ga Aleksandrovna remembered this voyage. “I had an odd feeling that though we were carrying on as we had done for centuries, some new and terrifying conditions of life were being formed by forces utterly beyond our control.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> The original text reads: “По дороге в оба конца народ выходил из сел и деревень с иконами.” (Mironenko, vol. 2, 758).

<sup>157</sup> The original text reads: “Из всех сел народ приходил к берегу реки, всюду были устроены арки, многие провожали пароход бегом.” (Ibid.).

<sup>158</sup> The original text reads: “... народ стоял сплошной стеной по берегу даже в воде по колено” (Ibid., 759).

<sup>159</sup> Vorres, *The Last Grand-Duchess*, 130.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.



Figure 15: *Mezhen* is leaving Kostroma.

This was, after all, another magnificent performance, the kind that re-imaged history; a history which, as Schechner would have it, “is not what happened but what is encoded and transmitted.”<sup>161</sup> The attempt at “encoding” history via a journey that seemed straight out of the Middle Ages again embellished the past. The presence of the cheering crowd on the riverbanks had to have dispelled any inkling of the people’s dissatisfaction with the regime, if it was indeed present at all and not part of some dramatic recollection years later.

The purpose of the tsar’s pilgrimage down the Volga in 1913 as his ancestor was to uncover the connection between himself and the people, as well as to assert his presence in his lands — a type of behavior that Clifford Geertz identifies as “stamping a territory with ritual signs of dominance.”<sup>162</sup> Like Mikhail, who made his way down the Volga to Moscow for his coronation, Nikolai II too donned his imperial status to experience this connection with his people. This tour-de-force came to an end in Moscow on May 26 (June 8), the final stop of the

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<sup>161</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 51.

<sup>162</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power,” in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 125.

journey, where the tsar descended into the underground of the Novospassky Monastery to visit the graves of his ancestors at the dynastic necropolis. The journey of traveling down the river (life) and visiting the graves of his ancestors (death) was, in many ways, a symbolic rebirth into a world that was devoid of its mythical glory. As he received a thunderous ovation at the opera in February or from the peasants along the Volga River in May, Nikolai II was reassured that the monarchy would endure. What he failed to foresee was that it was, in fact, his belated curtain call.

### 9. *Conclusions*

The jubilee celebrations achieved the goal of restoring the imperial family's faith in the special connection that the tsar and the Russian people shared. More than anything, they reassured Nikolai II in his divine right to rule. Although the roots of these practices date back to the Muscovite revival that began during the reign of Aleksandr III, they took a different form in the beginning of the twentieth century, specifically as a modernist response with a decidedly anti-modernist aesthetic. The ball *à la russe* of 1903 and the tercentenary celebrations of 1913 are two events that reenact a pre-Petrine myth and frame this decade as a period of transition. The ideological purposes behind the creation of these visions of seventeenth-century Muscovy appear to be rooted in the tsar's desperate wish to re-patriotize the nation, assert his power, and glean sources of Russia's identity, specifically at a time when this identity was being shaken by political events. Contemporaries recognized the monarchical intent in these anniversary celebrations as something more than elaborate masquerades, and rather as "a sort of symbol of the Emperor's political ideas."<sup>163</sup> A medieval mentality that projected a harmonious, orderly, and religiously unified state offered an anachronistic alternative to a country that was severely

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<sup>163</sup> Iswolsky, 265.

disturbed by revolutionary currents. The decision to articulate this period of transition through ritualized reenactments became a grounding element of all these performances. The ritual that was largely modeled on the court culture of Aleksei Mikhailovich produced an idiosyncratic, artificial version of Russian medievalism.

If the aristocracy enjoyed a front seat to these performances, the larger and uninvited audience — the country itself — was left to read about these bizarre imperial amusements at a time of crisis. Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich dramatically alluded to this disconnect between the two milieus in his memoirs, noting that while the elite danced through the night at the anniversary ball in 1903, “a new and a hostile Russia glared [at them] through the large windows of the palace.”<sup>164</sup> The government’s measures, which calmed the distress of 1905, left the country in an unbalanced, uncertain state:

Ruled (until 1905) by an absolute monarchy, administered by an all-powerful bureaucracy, and composed of social castes, Russia resembled an Oriental despotism. Its international ambitions ... injected into Russia a dynamism that was Western in origin. The contradiction between the static quality of the political and social order and the dynamism of the economy and cultural life produced a condition of endemic tension.<sup>165</sup>

As the situation worsened, those closest to the tsar recognized the artificial and unethical nature of this medieval theater, but failed to discourage it. Witte, who devoted his time to the industrialization of the empire and stabilized the currency by tying the ruble to the gold standard, was removed from office, as were other progressive ministers. Nikolai II increasingly surrounded himself with courtiers who, as Pipes suggests, reinforced the tsar’s preference for anachronistic political practices.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Alexander, *Grand Duke of Russia*, 211.

<sup>165</sup> Pipes, 53.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

During his travels through Russia, Marquis de Custine observed the Russian people's devotion to the cult of their monarch and their absolute submission to him: "sometimes the incense wearies the idol [...] this worship admits of terrible interludes [in] an absolute monarchy moderated by assassination."<sup>167</sup> Nikolai II's own "interlude" was fast approaching, as the aristocracy was grasping at the last straws of this grand illusion that they so enjoyed performing. World War I officially brought the curtain down on these courtly ceremonies with the so-called "last season" of 1914. Despite the changes that were rapidly taking place, Witte recalled how the tsar, on more than one occasion, arrogantly dismissed the relevance or weight of public opinion.<sup>168</sup> As a pious and self-effacing family man, Nikolai II lost all credibility in the starring role he was entrusted to play. The irony is that even as "Aleksei Mikhailovich," parading in regal robes and with a gem-studded staff in front of him during that February ball of 1903, the last Romanov tsar might not have been suited for a part that demanded a different kind of presence. As his brother-in-law regretfully recalled, the last Russian tsar was "obviously not sufficiently tall to do justice to his magnificent garb."<sup>169</sup>

Most of the ceremonial rituals performed at the court are best described as types of an *inaugural* rite, which emphasizes a smooth transition of power and promotes a sense of continuity, national unity, and tradition. The medieval ball of 1903 as well as the tercentenary celebrations that presented the tsar on a religious pilgrimage aimed to enforce these values. It seems ironic that the tsar's final transition of power on March 2 (15) of 1917, as a result of the February Revolution, lacked the essential attributes that were ingrained in his court and private

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<sup>167</sup> Custine, 121.

<sup>168</sup> Witte, 328.

<sup>169</sup> Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia, 211.

life, thereby becoming the final, secular ritual of his monarchy. The power of these medieval reenactments was in upholding the image of the tsar through the integration of secular and religious practices. The tradition that had its roots in the Middle Ages developed as part of the cross-relations between the church and state, defined by Ernst Kantorowicz as “mutual borrowings and exchanges of insignia, political symbols, prerogatives, and rights of honor.”<sup>170</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, the church had been under the control of the Russian state for over two hundred years and supported these “borrowings,” which were showcased at the imperial court. Turning to the epoch of Aleksei Mikhailovich was significant as those were the years before church politics shifted from Byzantine to European traditions. This shift, which commenced with Patriarch Nikon’s reforms in the 1650s-1660s and which were later enforced during the reforms of Peter I, threw the country off its original course. The court grew accustomed to repeating ceremonial rites on church and state holidays, which provided the tsar with the opportunity on several occasions to replay the role of his medieval predecessor.

The myth of a tsar in these aesthetic recreations and his pilgrimages, remained important insofar that it was used ideologically, whereas the myth itself was no longer viable during this time of tremendous stress, loss of life, and exacerbated political tensions. Although all of these medieval reenactments are united under a broad arch of performance, some of them represent traditions going back centuries. Nikolai II’s coronation is qualitatively different than, for instance, the medieval ball held at the Winter Palace or his travels down the Volga River to see his people during the tercentenary celebrations. The coronation is a tradition, meaningless, perhaps, but with a long historical record, whereas the medieval ball or the journey down the Volga were attempts to artificially recreate and perform medieval things that had no meaning

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<sup>170</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193.

otherwise. Although the degrees of medievalism in these rituals may vary, collectively they represent the embodied behaviors that structured life as performance (Hoffman), and, through “a set of symbolic forms,” showed the nation its political and governing center (Geertz). The fascination with these medieval rituals engendered repetition that was ultimately futile in the face of a collapsing ideology or, as Turner would have it, affected the pattern of social relations that endures through continuity and change (schisms). The fundamental opposition during this time in the Russian Empire appears to have been not “ritual” and “change” but rather a ritual that caused changes. Enamored with his dream of restoring Muscovy, Nikolai II participated in the ceremonies that promoted the aesthetic values of the distant past but became more difficult to maintain until they were phased out with the advent of World War I. This fascination with rituals and their performances was also taking place in a completely different realm, that of dramatic literature and in the works of the writers who, much like their monarch, were unable to resist the allure of the Middle Ages.

## Chapter 2: Rituals of Passage in Modernist Dramas

### 1. *Staging the Fantasy: The First Season of the Ancient Theater*

“The baron’s fantasy” is how Aleksandr Benois, a celebrated artist and founder of the World of Art, referred to the phenomenon of the Ancient Theater that premiered its first season on December 7 (20), 1907 in St. Petersburg.<sup>171</sup> Baron Nikolai Drizen, this theater’s ardent promoter and sponsor, along with an art historian, Mikhail Burnashev, and a theater theoretician, Nikolai Evreinov, stood at the helm of this pseudo-medieval enterprise.



Figure 16: Ivan Bilibin's emblem of the Ancient Theater.

Despite the collaborative effort, the venture was considered the baron’s undertaking (hence, Benois’ reference) and Evreinov’s brainchild, which preceded Evreinov’s theories of theater by several years.<sup>172</sup> The bill advertised the event as an invitation to two evenings devoted to the Middle Ages, with a repertoire that boasted a variety of medieval genres from the High and Late European Middle Ages (ca. 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the early years of the Renaissance (ca. 16<sup>th</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Aleksandr Benois, *Moi vospominaniia*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), 479.

<sup>172</sup> *An Introduction to Monodrama* [Vvedenie v monodramu] (1909), *The Theater as Such* [Teatr kak takovoi] (1912), *The Theater for Oneself* [Teatr dia sebia] (1915-1917), and *Pro Scena Sua* (1915).

century). Evreinov envisioned making the Ancient Theater a permanent one devoted to the performances of the old repertoire (both Russian and European) and hoped to introduce seasons chronologically: beginning with the theaters of Ancient Greece and Rome and ending with the dramas by Shakespeare and Moliere. The plan had to be altered after his contemporaries discouraged the staging of Greek and Roman dramas, which they regarded as being irrelevant to the development of the Western European theatrical model. In the end, only two seasons were produced: the first in 1907-1908, which attempted to recreate the European Middle Ages (11<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries); and the second in 1911-1912, which was devoted to Spanish Theater (17<sup>th</sup> century).



Figure 17: The advertisement of the Ancient Theater’s premiere.

The first evening opened with three plays: *The Three Magi* [Tri volkhva], a liturgical drama based on the text of an unknown author (ca. 11<sup>th</sup> century); *The Miracle of Theophilus* [Deistvo o Teofile], a miracle play by Rutebeuf (13<sup>th</sup> century); and *The Play of Robin and*

*Marion* [Igra o Robene i Marion], a pastoral by Adam de la Halle (13<sup>th</sup> century). The second evening showcased *The Present-Day Brothers* [Nyneshnie brat'ia], a morality play by an obscure Christian writer named Nicolas (ca. 15<sup>th</sup> century), and two farces, *About a Tub* [O chane] and *About a Cuckold's Hat* [O shliape-rogache], by Jehan d'Abondance (15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries).<sup>173</sup> The attempt at re-creating the ancient theater, as Drizen noted, was not particularly unique given the examples of the Chorégies at the Roman Theater of Orange in France that began in 1869 and Nikolai Arbatov's productions of pre-Petrine plays.<sup>174</sup> Evreinov explained that the advantage of this new establishment was "to gradually illustrate the evolution of stage production"<sup>175</sup> and hoped to show a medieval spectator being involved in a performance.<sup>176</sup> Drizen recognized the purpose of this theater in systemizing medieval genres based on their fundamental structure.<sup>177</sup> Considering how little a contemporary theater-goer knew about medieval drama, Evreinov strived for authenticity onstage, which, unfortunately, often bordered on naturalism. The elite ensemble of contributors included Aleksandr Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Sergei Gorodetskii as translators; Ivan Bilibin, Nikolai Rerikh, Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, Vladimir Shchuko, Benois with his nephew Evgenii Lansere as artists; and Il'ia Sats as musician. The acting troupe consisted

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<sup>173</sup> The second evening originally included two more plays: *Comedy about Adam* [Igra ob Adame], a miracle play by an unknown author (12<sup>th</sup> century) and a variation on folk theater [Ulichnyi teatr (Iarmarka na indikt Sviatogo Denisa)], written by Evreinov in the spirit of the street plays performed in the fourteenth century. The folk drama was abandoned due to the unrealistic scope of a street production. The miracle play, however, did not pass the censorship which was not uncommon. See, for example, the Church's reluctance about allowing a performance of Konstantin Romanov's play *Tsar of Judea* [Tsar' Iudeiskii] (1914). At first it was not approved, but ultimately was staged at the Hermitage Theater in 1914 (Nikolai II saw it too, and liked it very much). It was perceived as a mystery play by its audience.

<sup>174</sup> Nikolai Drizen, "Starinnyi teatr (Vospominaniia)," *Stolitsa i usad'ba* 71 (December 1916): 8.

<sup>175</sup> Nikolai Evreinov, Letter to N.V. Drizen from August 15, 1907, *Nashe Nasledie* 93-94 (2010), <http://www.nasledie-rus.ru/podshivka/9408.php> (accessed October 7, 2017).

<sup>176</sup> Evreinov aimed on breaking the fourth wall with a spectator becoming a part of the play itself as well as retaining his role as a spectator.

<sup>177</sup> Drizen, 8.

mostly of artists who were required to attend lectures on the histories of literature, music, iconography, and the figure of the medieval actor. The latter was particularly important to Evreinov who, shortly after the premiere, published an article in which he characterized the medieval actor as naïve, impulsive, and primitive in his technique.<sup>178</sup>



Figure 18: Nikolai Evreinov's production of *The Three Magi*.

“Poetry is about to enter the Middle Ages,”<sup>179</sup> wrote Aleksandr Blok in a letter to Sergei Solov’ev (Vladimir Solov’ev’s nephew) on December 20 (January 2), 1903 (1904), almost four years before the Ancient Theater’s premiere. He hopes to instill poetry with elements of light, purity, and rebirth, while emphasizing a similar interest in the revival of medievalism that already marked European modernisms. “Poets will again become beautiful and proud and will return to the most charming sources of pure poetry,” he states, “all the old genres will be resurrected.”<sup>180</sup> This new poet, as Blok envisioned him, would transform into a warrior, a knight, and an astronomer. Blok’s poetic cycle *On the Field of Kulikovo* [Na pole Kulikovom] (1908)

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<sup>178</sup> Nikolai Evreinov, “Starinnyi teatr. Ob aktere srednikh vekov,” *Teatr i iskusstvo* 50 (December 1907): 839.

<sup>179</sup> Aleksandr Blok, vol.8 of *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow-Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960-1963), 79.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

would come to represent a personal quest to resurrect these concepts and comprehend them anew through the national spirit of Russian medieval history. Other writers of this period were preoccupied with similar quests. Viacheslav Ivanov celebrated the traditions of ancient cultures; Osip Mandelstam idealized the medieval epoch in his manifesto of *acmeism*; Konstantin Balmont, Maksimilian Voloshin, Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Gumilev, too, wove medieval themes, with their refined, rich, and exotic narratives, into their works. The same propensity for medieval allusions permeates many of the prose works of these years. Two prominent novelistic examples are Valerii Briusov's *The Fiery Angel* [Ognennyi angel] (1907-1908), a novel set in sixteenth-century Germany, and Dmitrii Merezhkovskii's second part of the popular trilogy *Resurrected Gods. Leonardo da Vinci* [Voskresshie bogi. Leonardo da Vinchi] (1900) that focuses on the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. Additionally, there was a proliferation of literary mystifications in the symbolist circles that too drew inspiration from European medievalism from Briusov's *noms de plumes* to the much-discussed duel between Voloshin and Gumilev in 1909 that was provoked by the *femme fatale* Cherubina de Gabriak (a literary pseudonym of Elizaveta Dmitrieva). This pleiad of poets and novelists was also actively translating medieval texts from French, English, German, Polish, Czech, and other languages, all the while forming their notions about the development of the European Middle Ages and its influence on the modern literary aesthetic.

A new generation of playwrights emerged, many of whose writings for the stage are less recognized than their more highly-acclaimed works in poetry and prose. Their exercise in medievalism in dramatic literature materialized in two types of dramas: the first category included plays on medieval topics; the second category consisted of plays that were written according to the genre rules of mystery plays. These mystery plays harbored their own two

distinct groupings. The first one drew its inspiration from the ancient genre in its Greco-Roman form of *mystery* (μυστήρια) as a sacrament that recreated some form of religious rites. The plays in this group imitated the Orphic, Eleusinian, Delphic, and Dionysian mysteries that dramatized various Hellenic myths. Such is the intent of Ivanov's tragedies, *Tantalus* [Tantal] (1905) and *Prometheus* [Prometei] (1919); a similar vision informs Innokentii Annenskii's four tragedies and Fedor Sologub's *The Gift of Wise Bees* [Dar mudrykh pchel] (1906). A fascination with the mythologies of the ancient world led many symbolists to re-work, re-create and re-write dramas based on the tragedies of Ancient Greece, Rome, Middle East, and India. These dramas — many of which are written in verse — dominate symbolist dramaturgy and serve as models for these writers' visions of the stage.<sup>181</sup> Had Evreinov not decided in favor of medieval mystery genre that centered largely on the passion of Jesus Christ, these plays, inspired by Greek and Roman myths, would have been a part of the first season of the Ancient Theater.

The *mystery play* in medieval Europe was a liturgical drama based on biblical or hagiographic (lives of saints) narratives that involved the performance of a religious ritual. It is commonly thought that the name “mystery play” is derived from *ministerium*, which in Latin means an occupation, craft, or service.<sup>182</sup> The first plays of this kind were performed by clerics in church squares beginning sometime in the tenth century, reaching the apex of their popularity in the fifteenth century when they were gradually replaced by the first professional theaters. These performances had the didactic purpose of enlightening the audience, most of which consisted of people who did not know Latin, about important episodes from the Bible. Some of the main

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<sup>181</sup> See Liudmila Borisova's *Na izlomakh traditsii. Dramaturgiia russkogo simvolizma i simvolistskaia teoriia zhiznetvorchestva* (2000).

<sup>182</sup> Richard Beadle, “Mystery play,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. vol. 8, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987): 657-663.

features, which developed in this genre over time, included the addition of non-biblical passages (interludes), comic scenes, organization of plays into cycles, the replacement of Latin with the vernacular, and performances by the clergy and, after 1210 (the year Pope Innocent III forbade the clergy from acting in these plays), local guilds.<sup>183</sup> One can see how medieval mystery plays appealed to the playwrights of the Silver Age, who recognized them as defining moments in the development of Western European theatrical thought. The function of these religious dramas changed from merely religious teachings to a form of entertainment after they migrated out of the church and into the streets, where they were secularized. This was a genre that, from its inception, continued to evolve, and in the process came to reflect the socio-economic discourse of society. Even after medieval mysteries were no longer produced, their elements reappeared in the Renaissance dramas of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and others. New historicists explain this phenomenon as an attempt to fill the sudden void of rich medieval culture that existed prior to the Protestant Reformation which, as was the case in England, suppressed the performance of these mystery cycles.<sup>184</sup>

Two common variations (or subgenres) of mystery plays were *miracle* and *morality plays*. The *miracle play* is usually defined as a dramatic genre in which the protagonist is saved from a moment of crisis by a miraculous intervention.<sup>185</sup> The *morality play* was derived in part from the scholastic habit of analyzing man into his constituent elements, along with his characteristic maladies and the spiritual remedies which oppose them.<sup>186</sup> For a Russian intellectual living at the cusp of the twentieth century, *any* type of medieval drama was simply a

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2002).

<sup>185</sup> Alan E. Knight, "Miracle play," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 431.

<sup>186</sup> Alan H. Nelson, "Morality play," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 484.

mystery play. The encyclopedic sources from the nineteenth century still list miracle and morality plays as important subgenres, but later ones do not emphasize the distinction and focus on the mystery play as the main type of medieval religious drama.<sup>187</sup>



Figure 19: "...a white angel, a black hairy devil, and completely naked Adam and Eve peered behind a stage curtain." Aleksandr Benois.

The Ancient Theater, therefore, appeared right in time to fill this lacuna in knowledge about different medieval genres, strengthen their generic boundaries, and reintroduce them to the public. Its rich repertoire of liturgical, morality, and miracle plays, farce, and pastoral dramas certainly intrigued the contemporary viewer. Since nobody in the Russian Empire had witnessed these types of medieval stylizations, critics were either ecstatic, spiteful, or bewildered in their responses after the theater's December premiere, whereas the public was largely confused. The positive reviews praised the decorations and costumes; the negative ones attacked the amateur actors. Even some of those involved in the production failed to grasp its purpose. Benois, for example, labeled the attempts to restore "dead forms" as naïve and paradoxical, equating the preposterousness of such attempts to a diametrically opposite phenomenon, a "modern"

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<sup>187</sup> See Il'ia Berezin's *Encyclopedic Dictionary* [Russkii entsiklopedicheskii slovar' I.N. Berezina] (1873-1879), Sergei Iuzhakov's *Big Encyclopedia* [Bol'shaia entsiklopediia] (1904-1909) and *The Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* [Entsiklopedicheskii slovar' Brokgauza i Efrona] (1890-1907).

recreation of a Parisian cabaret in St. Petersburg.<sup>188</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold was also not particularly optimistic about the future of Evreinov's creation and recognized two possible outcomes for the Ancient Theater's development: either reconstructing medieval plays as they were originally intended or employing a "free composition" technique that loosely relied on medieval originals.<sup>189</sup> Evreinov, in his opinion, adopted the first approach but polluted it with elements from the second. For instance, the chorus in *The Three Magi* sang a Latin hymn while the actors paraded against a backdrop of medieval decorations on a modern stage.<sup>190</sup> The active role of the narrator in several of these plays — the character of Prologue in *The Present-Day Brothers*, the game organizer (*conducteur du jeu*) in *The Play of Robin and Marion* or the herald (*ирекo*), with his authorial remarks, in *The Miracle of Theophilus*<sup>191</sup> — reminded the audience of the performance in progress, hence reflecting the concepts of the modern, as opposed medieval theater.<sup>192</sup> In the end, Meyerhold concluded that the conflicts between the modern and medieval turned the Ancient Theater into a parody and forced it to sit "between two chairs."<sup>193</sup>

The first season of the Ancient Theater closed after only three months without great financial success. Evreinov and Drizen revived the venture several years later for a second season, and even outlined strategies for a third (dedicated to the Italian *commedia dell'arte*) before the war changed their plans. This theater's biggest achievement, it seems, was in making

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<sup>188</sup> Benois, 478-479.

<sup>189</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Stat'i, pis'ma, rechi, besedy*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo 1968), 189.

<sup>190</sup> Nikolai Evreinov, *Tri volkhva*, in *Dramaticheskie sochineniia*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M.G. Kornfel'da, 1914), 49-52.

<sup>191</sup> Eduard Stark (Zigfrid), *Starinnyi teatr* (Peterburg: Tret'ia strazha, 1922), 20.

<sup>192</sup> These narrators fulfilled the same roles as the narrators (*degatari*) found in the Japanese kabuki theater, which influenced Meyerhold's theatrical theories and whose purpose was to emphasize the play's puppet origins.

<sup>193</sup> Meyerhold, 190.

the forgotten dramatic genres familiar to the public; it capitalized on one of the dominant sensibilities of the Silver Age (medievalism) and, along with its leading artistic movement (symbolism), strived to present the whole complex of medieval-themed plays as a system. The conflict of three distinct trends — reconstruction, stylization, and historical naturalism — undermined the uniformity of the concepts in these productions and led to failure.<sup>194</sup> Despite its flaws, the Ancient Theater responded to the contemporary cultural fascination with the traditions of the European Middle Ages and educated the public about the origins of European drama.

## 2. *Toward a New Theater*

Konstantin Trepnev's agonizing words in the first act of *The Seagull* [Chaika] (1895) sum up the need for different theater that the intellectuals of this period felt: "We need new forms. We must have new forms, and if we don't, we may as well have nothing at all."<sup>195</sup> Even those who looked down on bold experiments in the dramatic field recognized the need for theatrical reform that was already in full swing in Europe on the page and the stage. "This repertoire [from the 1880s and 90s]," assesses one theoretician (likely Anatolii Lunacharskii), "illustrates the absence of the elements that made contemporary literature successful: the depiction of contemporary life and reflection of new societal trends."<sup>196</sup> The decision to adapt the genre of the mystery play to the modern stage was part of a larger movement that formed as a response to the melodramas in the mediocre repertoire of the late nineteenth century. This was the way that the playwrights of the *fin de siècle* reacted against the theater, which they considered to be grounded in a so-called "landlord psychology" that had stagnated the theater's development for decades.

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<sup>194</sup> Tatiana Dzhurova, "Teatral'nost' i rekonstruktsiia: dva sezona 'Starinnogo teatra'," *Teatron* 1 (2008): 33.

<sup>195</sup> Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull* in *Chekhov: Four Plays*, trans. Carol Rocamora (Lyme: Smith & Kraus, 1996), 42.

<sup>196</sup> Viacheslav Charskii [pseud.], "Khudozhestvennyi teatr," in *Krizis teatra* (Moscow: Problemy iskusstva, 1908): 127-128.

The legendary fiasco of *The Seagull*'s premiere on October 17 (29), 1896, at the Aleksandrinskii Theater in St. Petersburg has long been regarded as the pivotal moment that divided the history of Russian theater into "before" and "after." Critics immediately recognized the innovation and the new possibilities that Chekhov's drama offered, despite its failure to translate onto the naturalist stage.

The production of *The Seagull* at MKhAT (The Moscow Art Theater) two years later in 1898, under the supervision of Konstantin Stanislavskii and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, became the first step in this theater reform. "Everything proceeded without a hurry, not like in other theaters and other plays," Boris Zaitsev recalled the experience of watching this adaptation of *The Seagull*. "They play so naturally," was the reaction of the audience, "as though this were real life."<sup>197</sup> This new production captured the essence of Chekhov's absurdist theater in which dramas lack catharsis, a unifying conflict, or satisfactory resolutions. Like European modernist dramas, his plays also synthesized elements of other genres, such as farce and tragedy.<sup>198</sup> As a so-called "bridge" between realist and modernist traditions, Chekhov's plays articulated this period of transition with a version of "reality" that was also inscribed in mysterious and even mystical ways. Although Chekhov himself never wrote mystery plays, he did have an opinion on the genre: Nina Zarechnaia's recital of the futuristic fragment from Treplev's play is a parody on the type of symbolist drama that was popular in Europe. Chekhov was not alone in his disdain for these symbolist dramas as other Russian writers of late nineteenth century also considered them ludicrous. For example, the narrator in Fedor Dostoevskii's *Demons* [Besy] (1871-1872) informs the reader about a poem that was written by Stepan Verkhovenskii in his youth. The

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<sup>197</sup> Boris Zaitsev, *Iunost'* in vol. 4 of *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1999), 357 and 359.

<sup>198</sup> Walter Koschmal, "Das Drama der russischen Moderne," in *Die literarische Moderne in Europa*, eds. Hans J. Piechotta, et al., (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 366.

narrator admits that he understands absolutely nothing about this genre and proceeds to describe it as follows:

... it is a strange piece. ... It is some sort of allegory, in lyrical-dramatic form, resembling the second part of *Faust*. The scene opens with a chorus of women, then a chorus of men, then of some powers, and it all ends with a chorus of souls that have not lived yet but would very much like to live a little. All these choruses sing about something very indefinite, mostly about somebody's curse, but with a tinge of higher humor. Then suddenly the scene changes and some sort of "Festival of Life" begins, in which even insects sing, a turtle appears with some sort of sacramental Latin words, and, if I remember, a mineral — that is, an altogether inanimate object — also gets to sing about something. Generally, everyone sings incessantly, and if they speak, they squabble somehow indefinitely, but again with a tinge of higher meaning.<sup>199</sup>

The new generation of Russian playwrights aimed to disprove this notion of mystery plays as primitive and ambiguous. During the process, in addition to countering realist and naturalist dramas, they also reacted against Chekhov; while he inspired them, his place in the development of modern drama lay on the opposite end of a spectrum. The decision to employ the archaic genre of the mystery play offered the possibility to create new myths — which Chekhov's dramas never intended to do — and to re-experience the organic time of the Middle Ages: "organic" in the utopian sense of Saint-Simon, who presented it within the context of a certain heartbeat that exists in world history during which organic and critical periods alternate. "The organic was a period in which individuals were tied together by some common bond — be it war or religious faith — in which there was at least a harmony between spiritual and secular powers," describes it the Saint-Simonian vocabulary. "The order may have been rooted in false scientific assumptions, as it was in the Middle Ages, and the moral level of an organic epoch may have been relatively low [...] but these ages were sound, healthy, human, harmonious, social,

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<sup>199</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 10. Original italics.

integrated.”<sup>200</sup> In this respect, the Middle Ages offered an artistic refuge for playwrights living in a critical period that was rife with terror and uncertainty.<sup>201</sup>

The transformation of mystery plays into a new form of Russian drama began as a so-called “symbolist project.” Andrei Belyi was among the first symbolist writers to declare in his essay, “Forms of Art” [Formy iskusstva] (1902), that drama had to return to the form of the mystery play.<sup>202</sup> Belyi would change his mind about the feasibility of this idea three years later, in 1906, with a declaration to “let theater remain theater, and the mystery play remain a mystery play.”<sup>203</sup> The concept of restoring a mystery genre onstage, however, had already taken off by then, opening the floodgates for several promising but mostly unrealistic attempts to integrate it with the vision of a world in crisis.<sup>204</sup> The general idea behind symbolism in the theater was that whatever happened on stage was symbolic, and characters themselves could be symbols and their actions were symbolic as well, thereby pointing to a world outside of literature and outside everyday reality. This became one of the central features of Russian symbolist drama despite any disagreements that existed among the symbolists, whereas its most coveted form — the mystery play — acted as a medium specifically for philosophical and sociopolitical discourses.

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<sup>200</sup> Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), 627.

<sup>201</sup> One of the earliest expressions of this symbolist philosophy is Dmitrii Merezhkovskii’s lecture on “On the Reasons for the Decline and on the New Trends in Contemporary Russian Literature.” [O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury] that was given on October 26 (November 8), 1892. He develops this idea of fear and fascination with the unknown, as well as returning to the “ideal”, to a *Weltanschauung* that can unite the phenomenal and noumenal.

<sup>202</sup> Andrei Belyi, “Formy iskusstva” in *Simvolizm. Kniga statei* (Moscow: Kul’turnaia revoliutsiia, Respublika, 2010), 139.

<sup>203</sup> Belyi, “Teatr i sovremennaia drama.” In *Teatr: Kniga o novom teatre*, 288.

<sup>204</sup> Valerii Briusov’s *conditional theater* (условный театр); Fedor Sologub’s *theater of one will* (театр одной воли); Viacheslav Ivanov’s *sobornyi (choric) theater* (соборный театр); Nikolai Evreinov’s monodrama and pan-theatrical theories; Konstantin Balmont’s *theater of youth and beauty* (театр юности и красоты); Maksimilian Voloshin’s *theater of dreams* (театр сновидений); et cetera.

“Drama lifts the veil off the future for the first time,” Belyi wrote some time later. “It is in this drama where the creative missile encounters walls. The explosion that takes place is outside of drama.”<sup>205</sup> The notion of this new drama as a potent political weapon appealed not only to the symbolists but also to writers who were not associated with any particular literary movement. Through an intricate web of symbols, allusions, and analogies, this artistic milieu of Russian intellectuals aimed to articulate the contemporary situation in medieval terms with the hope of creating a theater that would unite people based on a common religion and an appreciation of art. Blok wrote *The Puppet Show* [Balaganchik] (1907) specifically for the symbolist theater “The Torches” [Fakely], whose concept originated during discussions at Ivanov’s Wednesday gatherings. Although dramatic experiments continued throughout the decade, none of the symbolists’ other grand plans for the Torches came to life.

### 3. *Liturgy, Mystery, and Kozlovak*

The modernist playwrights were occupied by the question of how to label the emerging type of drama that strived to imitate medieval mystery plays. In his article “Art and the Mystery Play” [Iskusstvo i misteriiia] (1906), Belyi, who was already disillusioned about the possibility of restoring the genre, invented a rather degrading term for these efforts, which, in his opinion, turned dreams about the mystery play into a goat dance, *kozlovak*.<sup>206</sup> *Kozlovak*, in this instance, is a reference to Greek mystery plays with their performances of sacred rites. Over a century later, the question of what to call these plays remains open. The combination of “modernist” and “mystery play” is an oxymoron, for a genre cannot be both modern and medieval, whereas the addition of “Russian” further problematizes the terminology, for no such genre in its Western-

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<sup>205</sup> Andrei Belyi, “Teatr i sovremennaia drama.” In *Teatr: Kniga o novom teatre*, ed. Anatoly Lunacharskii (St. Petersburg: Shipovnik, 1908), 267.

<sup>206</sup> Andrei Belyi, *Arabeski* (Moscow: Musaget, 1911), 321.

European form existed in Russian culture. Historically, the first secular theater of Muscovy emerged during the times of Aleksei Mikhailovich. The progenitors of this new art form in Medieval Rus' were travelling entertainers, known as *skomorokhs*, who put on shows and lighthearted performances for the public with songs, music, jokes, and animals (usually bears). Although they periodically experienced persecution by church and state authorities, they were nonetheless responsible for the only form of entertainment known, a so-called *peoples'* (or *popular*) *theater* (народный театр), which was welcomed by everyone regardless of their rank or status. This folk theater already included the recreation of nativity dramas of Ukrainian origin (*vertep*) and *petrushka*. Early in his reign, nineteen-year-old Aleksei issued the famous decree<sup>207</sup> that called for the prosecution of *skomorokhs*.<sup>208</sup> For the young tsar, the entertainment of these vagabonds, with their “devil’s games,”<sup>209</sup> violated God’s laws, distracted people from a Christian way of life, and promoted pagan celebrations.

The first version of a court theater, built on the European model, “travelled” from the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth through Ukraine and into Muscovy nearly thirty years after Aleksei Mikhailovich’s anti-*skomorokh* campaign. This new theater was a significant departure from the face-painted minstrels with trained animals. A performance of *The Comedy of Artaxerxes* [Artakserksovo deistvo], which took place on October 17 (27), 1672 — incidentally, only four months after the birth of Aleksei Mikhailovich’s son, Peter — is officially considered

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<sup>207</sup> *The Tsarist Charter for Belgorod on the Correction of Morals and Annihilation of Superstitions* [Tsarskaia gramota v Belgorod ob ispravlenii npravov i unichtozhenii sueverii] (1648).

<sup>208</sup> Petr Ivanov, *Opisanie gosudarstvennogo arkhiva starykh del* (Moscow: Tipografiia S. Selivanovskogo, 1850), 298.

<sup>209</sup> The original text reads: “А где обявятся домры и сурны, и гудки, и гусли, и хари, и всякие гудебные бесовские сосуды, и тебе б то все велеть выймати, и изломав те бесовские игры, велеть жечь.” (Ibid).

the beginning of Russian theater.<sup>210</sup> This theater existed for four years, during which nine plays were performed. As Aleksei Mikhailovich gave orders for the first play to be staged, he had to have recognized the similarities between his own courtly life with its daily, carefully orchestrated routines and this new art form entering his still very medieval country at a time when the rest of Europe was experiencing the final decades of Renaissance.

Nineteenth-century European playwrights referred to these types of dramas as “symbolist mystery plays,” and, unlike their Russian counterparts, they had a legitimate claim to the genre. The corpus of these so-called Russian mystery plays of the Silver Age is so diverse that it is nearly impossible to compile a set of rules that would account for all idiosyncrasies introduced by Russian playwrights. Some of these plays are written in prose and others in verse; some are explicitly subtitled “mystery plays” and others are identified as variations on the genre, such as a *mystic play* (мистика), *liturgy* (литургия), *feerie* (феерия), *fantasy* (фантазия), *comedy* (действие); some are constructed in a way that is reminiscent of a religious service and others appear to have no trace of this liturgical component. Many of these dramas are usually studied not as mystery plays per se but within a conveniently broad context that acknowledges the existence of certain aspects (мистерияльность) in their form. All this engenders a category that is ambiguous enough to include a variety of stylistically and formally dissimilar works.

When Ivan Karamazov introduces his poem about the Grand Inquisitor to his younger brother, he categorizes it as the same kind of mystery play that was performed in medieval

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<sup>210</sup> Johann Gottfried Gregory (1631–1675), a Lutheran pastor in charge of this new amusement, dramatized the biblical story of Esther. He hired actors and students from the school at which he taught to perform the play before the tsar in his chambers. To his credit, the pastor, albeit with great difficulty, managed to convince the monarch, who was quite cautious about the whole affair, to allow secular music — a constant attribute in shows by *skomorokhs* — to accompany the performance. The play went on for ten hours, occasionally interrupted by short, comic *interludes* (интермидии), while the sovereign sat in his chair and watched everything unveiling before him with great interest. Tsaritsa Natal’ia and family enjoyed the performance from a safe distance through the bars of the adjacent chamber, while the courtiers remained standing for the whole duration of this new “amusement.”

Europe. Unlike Verkhovenskii's poem, where the modernist take on a mystery play is ridiculed, Ivan treats the genre seriously by providing its brief overview. "With us in Moscow, in pre-Petrine antiquity, much the same kind of dramatic performances, especially from the Old Testament, were given from time to time," he says, "but, besides dramatic performances, there were many stories and 'verses' floating around the world in which saints, angels, and all the powers of heaven took part as needed."<sup>211</sup> These "performances" and "stories" are variations on the liturgical dramas that came to Muscovy from Byzantium in the form of religious rituals. For example, *The Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace* [Peshchnoe deistvo] was performed at Novgorod's Cathedral of St. Sophia in 1548 and *The Donkey Procession* [Shestvie na osliati], built around the story of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, premiered in 1611 when Polish-Lithuanian troops occupied the Kremlin. The establishment of the court theater in 1672 did not focus on expanding this tradition of religious performances, which had its roots in Greek Orthodoxy, but instead introduced a Western-European genre that dramatized narratives from the Catholic and Protestant bibles. The aforementioned *The Comedy of Artaxerxes*, along with Pastor Gregory's *Judith* [Iudif'] (1673) and Simeon Polotskii's version of the play about three young men in the fiery furnace were among the first mystery plays to be staged before the tsar.<sup>212</sup> Dmitrii Rostovskii's *Christmas Drama* [Rozhdestvenskaia drama] (1704) was likely the genre's last gasp before retreating into obscurity for the next two hundred years. But mystery plays did not completely disappear and continued to surface in the writings of those who recognized their potential at the time when everyone mimicked the dramas of Molière, Jean Racine, and Pierre

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<sup>211</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002): 247.

<sup>212</sup> Polotskii's original title reads: *О царе Навуходоносоре, теле злате и трех отроцех, в пеци не сожженных* (ca. 1673).

Corneille. Aleksandr Sumarokov's *The Hermit* [Pustynnik] (1757) was one such attempt that paid homage to a forgotten genre. During the nineteenth century the Slavic writers of the Russian Empire resumed their efforts to revive mystery plays. Some of them created their own versions: Wilhelm Küchelbecker's *Izhorskii* (1826) in Russian and Taras Shevchenko's *The Great Vault* [Velykyi l'okh] (1845) in Ukrainian. Many of these writers, including Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol', Dostoevskii, Turgenev, Ostrovskii, and the Polish Romantics, took a different spin on the genre by embedding its most recognizable features — biblical narratives and appearances of allegorical figures — into their dramatic and non-dramatic works.<sup>213</sup>

The presence of “mystery plays” in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian literary canon illustrates that the modernist writers enhanced an existing practice as opposed to having invented a new trend. In addition to the works by their immediate literary predecessors, they drew on the works of Maeterlinck, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hauptmann. While their plays may have begun as imitations, they quickly evolved into a different and, in many ways, more complex form of drama. The Russian playwrights turned to the medieval era for inspiration, which allowed them to explore spirituality — an important element of medieval culture that also channeled Solov'ev's philosophy. Despite their wide range and number (Valerii Briusov wrote at least forty-seven plays!), these “mystery plays” share common features that help to delineate their main characteristics. The first such characteristic of Russian mystery play is its intent to work as a symbolist drama, thereby rejecting any realistic tendencies in favor of abstract principles. Symbolists insisted that in order to achieve a profoundly different type of drama, the symbolist theater needed to transform itself into a theater of marionettes or a puppet theater. This

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<sup>213</sup> See Arkadii Mankovskii, “Romanticheskaiia ‘misteriia’ v ee vzaimodeistvii s drugimi zhanrami: k probleme genezisa filosofsko-simvolicheskoi dramy v Rossii: 1800-e - nachalo 1880-kh gg.” (PhD diss., Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2008).

vision promoted a world that was fragmented, absurd, and manipulated by hostile forces. The characters of this world were not real characters but rather symbols: personifications of the playwright's abstract ideas who often lack the psychological depth that can evoke empathy. One way in which the western playwrights emphasize the supernatural is through their choice of setting. These dramas are often situated in dangerous and forlorn places: forests, castles, islands, towers, or secluded houses. In contrast, many of the Russian playwrights favored the urban setting. Maurice Maeterlinck, the Belgian playwright who wrote several plays specifically for a theater of marionettes, had monumental influence on the development of Russian theatrical thought. Maeterlinck's theater, however, was one of stasis where nothing happened to the characters; he often left them contemplating their fate and waiting for an outcome. Russian dramas of that period are rarely static. Aleksandr Blok's *The Puppet Show*, for instance, became a cultural sensation as the first play to fully embrace this concept of abstract drama. He relies on symbols instead of allegory and on the abstract instead of the concrete to emphasize the artificiality of the created world. The play-within-a-play construct and the character of Author, who is dragged off the stage, are two examples of meta-theater that remind the audience about the performance in progress.

Another feature of mystery plays is their propensity to synthesize elements of other literary genres. Leonid Andreev's *The Life of a Man* [Zhizn' Cheloveka] (1906-1907) is one such work that presents the plight of a marionette-like figure of a man. In a letter to Andreev, Maksim Gor'kii praised his friend's efforts to establish a new form of drama but, as a genuinely realist playwright, remained critical of abstraction in the portrayal of characters: "You, as it seems to

me, took the form of the ancient mystery play,” writes Gor’kii, “but threw all characters out of it.”<sup>214</sup> *The Life of a Man* integrates several genres, which include:

1. Morality play: Each act in the play depicts a rise or fall in the life of Man, not unlike schematic depictions of “the traditional ages of man and the rise and fall of Fortune’s wheel.”<sup>215</sup> Man is born in the beginning of the play and dies at the end.
2. Miracle play: Andreev alludes to this by using a metaphysical figure of Someone in Gray (Некто в сером) who stands in a darkened corner of the stage with a burning candle that burns for the duration of Man’s life. There is the additional inclusion of a group of old women (akin to the *Moirai* from Greek myths) who are present at Man’s birth and death.
3. Puppet/marionette theater: Musicians from a hired orchestra resemble the musical instruments they play.
4. *Lubok* (as noted by Gor’kii): Man’s life is a narrative that is devoid of any heroic deeds or attempts to fight his circumstances.

Through tragedy, romance, comedy, and farce, Man remains an ambivalent figure who succumbs to the power of his fate. “Look and listen, ye who have come hither for mirth and laughter. Lo, there will pass before you all the life of Man, with its dark beginning and its dark end,”<sup>216</sup> Someone in Gray in the play’s Prologue informs the audience and foreshadows Man’s unhappy ending. This notwithstanding, this was a genre that was generally thought to possess a quality that, at least in Meyerhold’s opinion, had the power to reawaken an interest in life.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Ivan Anisimov, ed., *Gor’kii i Leonid Andreev. Neizdannaiia perepiska in Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, vol. 72 (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 278.

<sup>215</sup> Nelson, 484.

<sup>216</sup> Leonid Andreev, *The Life of Man*, in *Plays by Leonid Andreyeff: The Black Maskers; The Life of Man; The Sabine Women*, trans. Clarence L. Meader and Fred Newton Scott (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), 67.

<sup>217</sup> Meyerhold, 132.

Another characteristic of this genre is its detailed portrayal of metaphysical characters of a quasi-religious nature, which was largely avoided by the western playwrights, and which populate Russian dramas. These characters are types of creatures, who straddle both worlds and act as intermediaries, and who exist, as Turner would have it, “between alternative or opposing contexts.”<sup>218</sup> One such example is Death, the most popular medieval dramatic persona. Death in Blok’s *The Puppet Show* appears onstage as a young woman in a white dress and is later transformed into the main character’s bride. Her appearance lacks the essential medieval function of teaching people about the transience of life, which contributes to Death’s comic portrayal. Consequently, death in these dramas is rarely a devastating event; life continues as expected. In comparison, the arrival of death in Maeterlinck’s *Intruder* [L’Intruse] (1891), orchestrated through an intricate game of sounds, signals, and signs but never an actual appearance, or the ambiguous forces that snatch the child away in *The Death of Tintagiles* [La Mort De Tintagiles] (1894), are more terrifying precisely because they are not seen.

Since the playwrights of the Russian Silver Age were influenced by the Western modernists, who in turn based their works on the dramas of medieval Europe, their adaptations of mystery plays constituted a tertiary appropriation of this phenomenon. As the Russian dramatists attempted to present their vision of the Middle Ages as a pre-rational and mystical epoch, they interpreted this period as a time of order, of people working together and “tied by some common bond — be it war or religious faith — in which there was at least a harmony between spiritual and secular powers.”<sup>219</sup> This process of the genre’s secularization is evident in

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<sup>218</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater. The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 113.

<sup>219</sup> Manuel and Manuel, 627.

the large corpus of their dramas in which the liturgy disappeared, saints were replaced by metaphysical figures, and narratives relayed fantastical events, which were often set in contemporary Russia. The hallmark of these mystery plays is a *ritual*, which for the first time was programmatically embedded into the fabric of the dramatic act.

#### 4. *Rituals of Theater, Quest, and Trial*

“We are on the eve of a ‘great riot’!”<sup>220</sup> writes Aleksandr Blok in 1908 in his article about the future of Russian theater, borrowing “riot” from the work of another playwright, Leonid Andreev. “We are on the eve of events, and what failed once, twice and a third time — we will accomplish on our fourth try [...] we are living in the period of transition.”<sup>221</sup> Blok’s statement is not a political forecast but, rather, an intellectual perspective on the state of the arts in the Russian Empire. It is also an example of how sociopolitical intimations permeate the utterances of intellectuals during this period of uncertainty where it is often unclear whether the subject is art or politics. The period, which Blok identifies as “transitional time,” is one of instability and of rapid social change. As one of its main representatives, Blok recognizes disillusionment and chaos that define these years. “[There is nothing left] to hold on to,” he writes, “the ground disappeared under our feet, literature and drama have nowhere to blossom.”<sup>222</sup> While facing a world in crisis, intellectuals and politicians collectively choose medieval fantasy with its illusion of stability that helps society to cope with their absurd and brutal world.

The remainder of this chapter analyzes the ritual of passage — or, rather, its interrupted, inverted or parodied form — in the following works: Aleksei Remizov’s *Comedy of the Devils*

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<sup>220</sup> Aleksandr Blok, vol. 8 of *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1997-2010), 23.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Blok, vol. 6 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 290.

[Besovskoe deistvo] (1907); Aleksandr Blok's *The Song of Fate* [Pesnia Sud'by] (1908); and Leonid Andreev's *Tsar Hunger* [Tsar' Golod] (1908). All three plays were written at approximately same time and belong to the same genre of mystery plays. All three are set in Russia, whether during the early years of monasticism in the eleventh century, a medieval battle of late fourteenth century, or the beginning of the twentieth century. The selected rituals of passages, explicated *in medias res*, frame the pivotal moment in each of these works and do not proceed as intended.<sup>223</sup> The ambiguous forces, which, albeit common to the genre of medieval mystery plays, are foreign to the Russian tradition, set the rituals of passage in motion. These forces represent outside influences on Russian society, whether these are demons who organize a *theater*, a mysterious unknown who becomes the guiding light of the main character's *quest*, or an allegorical tsar who stages a *trial*.

Since ritual in these plays does not go according to plan, it generates different ways of looking at an individual or the collective involved in its performance. If elaborate courtly functions, such as the medieval-themed processions at the Russian imperial court, represent a ritual *per se*, then the depiction of this ritual in literature is a *meta-ritual*, a ritual that is embodied in a fictive world that is a play-within-a-play. The language of the ritual, Turner writes, trumps any literary attempt at depicting its authenticity with the ritual's core feature being *reflexivity*. In

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<sup>223</sup> A rite of passage that undermines the social structure is not one that concludes, but, rather, it is interrupted or proceeds according to an unexpected scenario. It is often referred to as an *inverted ritual* — the terminology that was first introduced by Walter Pater, who pondered in 1889 about the sources of the king's self-uncrowning scene in Shakespeare's first play about the rise and fall of the House of Lancaster, *Richard II*. Shakespeare imagines his character's "un-kinged" state by means of a ritual that reverses the sequence of acts that are usually associated with attaining the status of a sovereign. Shakespeare's Richard abdicates by performing a version of a political ritual that can be regarded as a reverse-coronation. King Richard first conducts a short rehearsal by relinquishing his title before his supporters in exchange for "a little grave" (3.3.143-59) and eventually performs a scene in which he forgoes all formalities associated with his title. (4.1.203-14). He gives up the artifacts of corporeal nature (a crown, scepter, manors, rents, revenues, acts) and spiritual (pride, self-awareness of his kingly status). In this example of a staged political abdication, the king's symbolic disrobing and verbal resignation construct an entirely new ritual of passage that exploits the logistics of the transition of power.

the same way that actors, by navigating the gap between “the real” and “the performed,” can self-reflect during their performances, the anti-structure of the ritual “represents the reflexivity of the social process, wherein society becomes at once subject and direct object.”<sup>224</sup> As both the subject and object, society is thrust into a state in which it evaluates itself through the performance of a ritual. The comic *Interludes* in the morality plays, for instance, can be read as elements of anti-structure or subversion in the spirit of Bakhtinian carnival culture. C. Clifford Flanigan demonstrates on the example of a late medieval biblical drama, the fifteenth-century Corpus Christi play from the town of Künzelsau, the medieval play’s structural and subversive properties. The example of both, he writes, is in the play’s anti-Semitic message: it promotes the anti-Jewish sentiments of the German Christian community (structural) and celebrates the performances by the clergy and seminary students who portrayed Jews crucifying Christ, all-the-while dressed as contemporary Christian clergy (subversive). “In the scenes which depict Jesus’ arrest and interrogation, characters who looked and dressed like the bishops who often visited the city and directly controlled many of its affairs become the cohorts of the villainous character,” writes Flanigan; “they thus become alien to the community which is called into being by the ritual.”<sup>225</sup> This anti-structural aspect, which, in this instance, is tied to the clergy’s performance, underscores the ambivalent nature of the ritual in theater.

The organization of the dramatic narrative is another important function of ritual in mystery plays. The religious ritual stipulates the veneration of sacred objects and, per Durkheim,

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<sup>224</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), vii.

<sup>225</sup> Clifford C. Flanigan, C. “Liminality, Carnival, and Social Structure. The Case of Late Medieval Biblical Drama.” in *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 53.

forms the *conscience collective* that binds the individual to the social entity.<sup>226</sup> The ritual hence becomes a defining moment of the mystery plays in that it fulfills the purpose of reminding society about the importance of Christian worship. Even as mystery plays were eventually dismissed for lacking artistic merit, and their characteristics migrated into forms of new drama, the ritual retained its original purpose as the determining element of the plot. The nature of such rituals is not always easy to define. Barbara Myerhoff proposes a solution that does not necessarily label rituals as sacred or secular but rather places them along a continuum where the “sacred” and “mundane” exist at different ends. She isolates the ritual’s most salient characteristic in its function as a frame that is a deliberate and artificial demarcation.<sup>227</sup> Approaching the ritual as a framing device allows one to arrest the moment of action and engender a state that is rife with interpretations.

The Russian modernists did not generally set out to write “closet dramas,” which, as literary texts, were plays intended to be read.<sup>228</sup> These playwrights envisioned their texts being performed onstage with their appeal is traced back to the staging of Greek tragedies and celebrations of agricultural holidays.<sup>229</sup> According to Schechner, rituals tend to have the greatest number of functions — seven interlocking spheres of performance that often overlap: to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to

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<sup>226</sup> Émile Durkheim, *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, trans. Anthony Giddens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 219-220.

<sup>227</sup> Barbara Myerhoff, “We don’t Wrap Herring in a Printer Page: Fusion, Fictions and Continuity in Secular Ritual.” in *Secular Ritual*, eds. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum & Comp., 1977), 200.

<sup>228</sup> The examples of such dramas in Western canon are Goethe’s *Faust* and Byron’s dramas. Merezhkovskii’s *Pavel I: drama for reading* [Pavel I: drama dlia chteniia] (1908) or Lunacharskii’s *Faust and the city: drama for reading* [Faust i gorod: drama dlia chteniia] (1918) are the examples of *lesedrama*, which is indicated in their titles.

<sup>229</sup> Meyerhold often organized the performance around the ritual. These early experiments with ritual by Russian and European theatrical producers gave impetus to innovations that would reform theater (Artaud, Brecht, Brook, Grotowski, etc.).

teach or persuade, and to deal with the sacred and the demonic.<sup>230</sup> Depicting inverted, incomplete or parodied rituals relies on a number of these functions when bringing forth a liminal world in which traditional roles are reversed and social equilibrium is compromised.

#### *4.1. Theater in Aleksei Remizov's Comedy of the Devils (1907)*

When two demons, Aratyr' (Аратырь) and Timelikh (Тимелих), from Aleksei Remizov's *Comedy of the Devils* (1907) disrupt a prayer ritual in hopes of luring the Ascetic (Подвижник) out of his cave, the duo does so by putting on a performance, which takes up most of Act 2.<sup>231</sup> These two mischiefs appear to emerge from medieval diableries to create a plan to mislead the devout recluse by directing a group of devils to appear before him as a chorus of angels. The scene begins with Timelikh, the demon in charge of the spectacle, introducing the acting troupe:

Devil of drunkenness, devil of gluttony, devil of avarice, devil of lust, devil of rage, devil of fury, devil of midday, devil of midnight. Mare, ox, wolf, crane, goat, doe, dog, mare, fox, lion, boar, hare, raven, hawk, owl, eagle-owl. — (*All of them trample on the same spot in anticipation of orders.*) — And these are the angels.<sup>232</sup>

Aratyr', who at this time in the play has seniority over Timelikh, scrupulously examines the performers and remarks on a malfunction with one of their costumes. "This is a disgrace, you can see the tail,"<sup>233</sup> he says. Aratyr' goes on to critique the actors on their performance with a speech that, as scholars have noted, parodies Hamlet's directions to the actors of *The Mousetrap*:

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<sup>230</sup> Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 46.

<sup>231</sup> Alla Gracheva, Natal'ia Griakalova, Iurii Rozanov, Elena Obatnina, Natal'ia Blishch, Sergei Dotsenko, and Igor' Popov are the scholars who published extensively on Remizov's life and works. This play has never been translated into English. The versions of its titles in English-language sources include *The Devil's Comedy*, *The Devil Way*, *The Devil's Pageant*, *The Devil's Deed*, *Demonic Pageant*, and others. My translation of the text relies on Remizov's second (and final) edition of the play, which was published in 1919, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>232</sup> Aleksei Remizov, *Besovskoe deistvo*, in *Rusaliia*, vol. 12 (St. Petersburg: Rostok, 2016), 24. Original italics.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

Please, behave yourself. Think of yourselves as romantic heroes and, like real actors, first smile pleasantly, and then breathe harder. Do you understand? [...] Speak distinctly, do not swallow letters; speak so that you are raising and then lowering your voices; practice sweet talk. Do you know your parts?<sup>234</sup>

Aratyr's directions clearly ridicule the principles of naturalism in theater and its exaggeration of emotional pathos, which was popular during the 1880s. This was the kind of theater that Remizov despised for its untruth, which, as he wrote, was forged to appear as the truth in the most degrading manner.<sup>235</sup> As the scene continues, the devils practice their roles in preparation for a theatrical spectacle that is intended to fool the Ascetic into believing that he has been visited by real angels. In the process, however, they illustrate their acting incompetence by reading their lines without excluding the authorial remarks.

What do the escapades of these two scheming demons have to do with Russia in the midst of Stolypin's political reaction? The anachronisms in the portrayals of Aratyr' and Timelikh, their blasphemy and cross-dressing, the entourage of devils that surrounds them, and their tortures of the Ascetic made the censors uncomfortable. Aside from that, it is the notion of the devil's action as *deistvo* ("action") that imbues the play with sociopolitical intimations. By placing two demons in charge, one can draw parallels between their chaotic performance and contemporary society, which had been thrust into its own irrational *deistvo*.

*Comedy* consists of a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue. Each act coincides with a religious holiday, beginning on the evening of the last Sunday before Great Lent and ending with the Ascetic's death on Easter. Leaving aside the central plot for the moment, it is important to note that this temporal period happens to overlap with the ancient pagan festival of Maslenitsa (Масленица), which celebrates the change of seasons and is similar to the European carnivals of

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Remizov, "Krashenye ryla," in *Rusaliia*, 561.

the Middle Ages. The celebration of Maslenitsa is presented in the parallel stories of the additional *dramatis personæ* consisting of masked characters. These characters include Mare (Кобылка), Wolf (Волк), Ox (Тур), Bear (Медведь), and Turitsa/Sinful Maiden (Турица/Грешная Дева), all of which derive from the Russian people's theater, thereby enabling Remizov to combine pagan and Christian worldviews that reflect the duality of Slavic cultures. Only Turitsa, who is also Sinful Maiden, navigates both the pagan and Christian worlds of the play. While the demons play pranks on the Ascetic, these masks celebrate the last day of Maslenitsa that is also the Sunday of Forgiveness, which is the final day before Great Lent. The carnival event provides a temporary release from structure, represents resistance to authority with its "carnival spirit," as Bakhtin would refer to it, and ensures renewal through the playfulness of the temporary world that it creates. Although the masks remain secondary characters, their joyful celebration is not unlike those of the cohort of devils who torture the Ascetic. Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, who worked as the stage designer on this play, later remembered how these characters of masks turned out even better than the principal characters. "For the ongoing revelry of Maslenitsa, I dressed a multicolored crowd in masks of folk toy-animals," he wrote. "Of all the costumes, these were, perhaps, the most successful."<sup>236</sup>

The play's prologue depicts an encounter between a brave warrior, Life (Живот<sup>237</sup>), and Death (Смерть), which symbolically takes place at a crossroads. Death wins the dispute, after which Aratyr' and Timelikh mercilessly drag Life's soul to their superior, Serpent (Змий), who resides in Hell. Having witnessed the horrible fate of his master, Life's young servant throws away his sword and vows to lead a Christian life of self-abasement and religiosity. The next

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<sup>236</sup> Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 232.

<sup>237</sup> Remizov is using a Church-Slavic, liturgical word "Живот" for the character of "Life" as opposed to contemporary "Жизнь."

three acts take place about three years later near the cave where this young servant (now known as the Ascetic<sup>238</sup>) prays and where the two demons torment him with various ordeals in order to get him to break his promise to God.



Figure 20: Mstislav Dobuzhinskii's stage design for the prologue of *Comedy of the Devils*.

Act 1 begins on the last day of Maslenitsa, which is also the final day of pre-Lent. Disguised as a monk, Aratyr', later joined by Timelikh, convinces the Ascetic to take a break from praying. Act 2 begins on the evening of the fifth Wednesday of Great Lent (Мариино стояние) — a reference to St. Mary of Egypt, another great ascetic — and shows the two demons rehearsing the aforementioned theatrical act with the chorus of devils dressed as angels. The performance, which aims to disrupt the Ascetic while he recites the Canon of Saint Andres of Crete, fails to proceed as planned. Act 3 begins on the night of the Saturday before Easter, with the demons continuing their attacks on the Ascetic. It ends with the Ascetic's torturous death after an arduous ordeal with Serpent himself. The epilogue depicts the Ascetic's soul departing for heaven while

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<sup>238</sup> Vladimir Dal's dictionary defines the ascetic (подвижник) as someone who has been made glorious by great deeds in every field; a brave, successful warrior or a righteous believer who struggles on his path of faith, including against various demons. (See Vladimir Dal's *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* [Tolkovy slovar' zhivogo velikoruskogo iazyka] (1863-1866), s.v. "Podvizhnik.")

the two demons, who failed to accomplish Serpent's assignment, find themselves utterly bored in Hell.

At the time of his debut as a playwright with *Comedy*, Remizov belonged to a group of playwrights who were searching for “new forms” of drama. He had already established a reputation as a prose writer who drew inspiration from the medieval tradition. His deeply religious upbringing, friendships with medievalists (most prominently with Pavel Shcheglov), fascination with and knowledge of Russian folklore, and his work alongside Meyerhold in provincial theaters engendered a prolific career as a prose writer and translator. Remizov's gift for stylizing ancient Slavic texts earned him the admiration of his contemporaries and became a life-long passion despite the controversy, generated by this unique approach to archaic texts early in his career.<sup>239</sup> He explained his approach to medieval materials as an attempt at reconstructing national myth, fragments of which survived in pagan rituals, games, songs, superstitions, beliefs, proverbs, riddles, conspiracies, and Apocrypha.<sup>240</sup> *Comedy* became the first play to be published alongside his other dramas in an eight-volume collected works titled *Rusalia Plays* [Rusal'nye deistva]<sup>241</sup>, which he described as “religious rituals, which were performed during auspicious periods.”<sup>242</sup> Remizov's literature connects this pagan rite to popular forms of folk entertainment, which included texts in esoteric, stylized Russian that became his literary trademark. “After the Christianization of Rus' [...] the ritual ceremony of *rusalia* was transformed into a semi-

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<sup>239</sup> See “Pisatel' ili spisyvatel'?” by Aiaks [pseud. A. A. Izmailov] in *Birzhevye vedmosti* from June 16 (29), 1909. The article accused Remizov of plagiarizing medieval and folk texts. Remizov responded to the accusations in a letter to the editors and received overwhelming support from his contemporaries such as V. Khlebnikov, M. Prishvin, and others.

<sup>240</sup> Aleksei Remizov, vol. 2 of *Sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomakh* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2000), 607.

<sup>241</sup> “Rusaliia” derives from *rusalka* (русалка), a pagan creature in Slavic mythology, also known as a water nymph. Rusalka is usually depicted as a young beautiful woman, who lives in a lake or river and lures men to their deaths.

<sup>242</sup> Remizov, *Rusaliia*, in *Rusaliia*, 219.

mundane, semi-religious gathering with dance, song, and music,” he explains. “A *rusalia* was played out by merry entertainers — *skomorokhs* [...] Alazion, Prince of the Devils, was the patron of *rusalia* who inspired its dances and songs.”<sup>243</sup> These rituals, which were once declared sinful by Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich, were interpreted by this Aleksei Mikhailovich (Remizov) as a creative force that needed to be brought back to life. Syncretism (двоеверие) as a remnant of Russia’s pagan past, along with Russian folk culture and forms of entertainment, developed into important themes in his works.

The full title of the play, as it appeared in the first edition, pays tribute to the archaic tradition that inspired it: *A demonic comedy concerning a certain husband, as well as the death of a sinner and the death of a believer, and the battle between Life and Death. A performance for the public with a prologue and epilogue.*<sup>244</sup> This lengthy title suggests the presence of at least four different genres in the play: a comedy (действие), morality play (deaths of a sinner and believer), trial by combat (прение), and an explicitly stated performance for the public. As previously mentioned, the “mystery play” was commonly used as a generic term for most genres of medieval drama at that time. Such long, complex titles, however, which were found in medieval texts — per Dmitrii Likhachev — were indicative of the scribe’s hesitance when it came to identifying the work’s genre and presented it as a combination of various genres depending on the topic of the work.<sup>245</sup> Remizov’s original title emulates both tradition and hesitation. His decision to use *comedy* (действие) echoes the titles of the first mystery plays,

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> *Besovskoe deistvo nad nekiim muzhem, a takzhe smert' greshnika i pravednika, sie est' prenie Zhivota so Smert'iu. Predstavlenie dlia publiki s prologom i epilogom.* The play was originally published in *Fakely*, vol. 2 (1907).

<sup>245</sup> Dmitrii Likhachev, *Poetika drevnerusskoi literatury*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), 58.

which were performed at the court of Aleksei Mikhailovich.<sup>246</sup> The combination *comedy of the devils* (бесовское действо) is usually interpreted as either a direct borrowing from *The Kiev Caves Monastery Patericon*, which dates to the beginning of the thirteenth century — Remizov’s primary historical source for this play — or a politically-inclined reference against *skomorokhs* that was found in Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich’s 1648 famous decree, which vowed to punish “all kinds of drunkenness and every rebellious demonic act, mockery, and buffoonery with all sorts of demonic games [that] multiplied in people.”<sup>247</sup>

Since Remizov’s *Comedy* is the only drama out of three analyzed in this chapter to be produced and staged, the notes from its production provide rich material that helps navigate his vision of the Russian Middle Ages and, in part, to underscore the medieval genre of the literary work. Dobuzhinskii, for instance, remembered the efforts that were made to enact a multi-level structure that evoked the original mystery plays. “‘Hell’ was located in a lower tier that was enhanced with a series of arches,” he writes. “They resembled caves leading underground, beneath the stage floor, and illuminated by ‘hellfire’. A fire was burning in the big black thorny crown in the middle of the orchestra; ‘stairs-ladders’ led to the stage and were designed for the devils climbing up from Hell.”<sup>248</sup> In addition to this stage organization, the plot included excerpts from the lives of saints, a prophecy of the Last Judgment, and the transformation of the fallen woman into a devout believer, all of which pointed in the direction of a mystery play. *Comedy*, however, is not a mystery play in its canonical definition. While the prologue and epilogue are emblematic of the said genre, the three acts only “gravitate” toward the genre, thereby retaining,

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<sup>246</sup> See Evgenii Poselianiin’s translation of *Kievo-pecherskii paterik. Polnoe sobranie zhitii sviatykh* (1897).

<sup>247</sup> Aleksandr Belkin, *Russkie skomorokhi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), 175.

<sup>248</sup> Dobuzhinskii, 231.

as Iurii Gerasimov suggests, the force field of a mystery play (“силовое поле мистерии”) as opposed to recreating a mystery play in its original form.<sup>249</sup> The allegorical nature of *Comedy* is a reason why “morality play” is a better fit for the play’s overarching genre. After all, this is a play where Death makes unannounced appearances, vices personified as devils gather for theatrical rehearsals, and demons test the praying recluse with lessons. It has also been noted that the play’s plot is constructed from fragments of various literary texts, not limited to legends, tales, and didactic stories, which align with the genre of those used by authors of morality plays.<sup>250</sup>

In reworking various narratives from the *Patericon*, Remizov incorporates excerpts from the hagiographies of Moses the Hungarian, the ever-suffering Ioann the Solitary, and, for the scene of the devils’ appearance as angels, the life of Isaakii Pecherskii. This behavioral paradigm, in its most extreme form of religious asceticism, is what established those early cave-dwellers in their roles as analogues of Biblical prophets, founders of holy orders, spiritual recluses, and guardians of the divine truth. A parallel always existed between the holy fool and the devil, with both of them sharing the trait of cursing the world (ругаться миру).<sup>251</sup>

Incidentally, Isaakii holds the distinction of being the first *iurodivyi* of Kievan Rus’ by exhibiting the attributes of the insane by wearing the raw skin of a slaughtered goat and shutting himself in a cave for seven years to pray, with only a window through which food was provided. Some of these characteristics are also present in the Ascetic. “He walked naked out in the cold weather. He exhausted his flesh with bowing, his tongue with silence, his mind with combating sinful

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<sup>249</sup> Iurii Gerasimov, “Teatr Alekseia Remizova,” in *Aleksei Remizov: issledovaniia i materialy*, ed. Alla Gracheva (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1994), 181.

<sup>250</sup> Iurii Rozanov, “Vozrozhdenie misterii” in “Dramaturgiia Alekseia Remizova i problema stilizatsii v russkoi literature nachala XX veka.” (PhD diss., Vologodskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institute (VGPI), 1994).

<sup>251</sup> Sergei Ivanov, *Vizantiiskoe iurodstvo* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994, 78).

thoughts,”<sup>252</sup> is how Timelikh describes him. Another such task is digging a hole in the ground to create a place in which to pray. All of these are the acts of a fool in Christ. For the duration of his temptations and ordeals at the hands of the demonic duo, Remizov’s Ascetic, just like Isaakii, relies on a prayer that is put on a par with the highest monastic feats of the early anchorites.<sup>253</sup>

The aforementioned rehearsal scene is for the performance that takes place later on in the play, when the devils are ordered to perform for the Ascetic. As “angels” they stumble awkwardly toward him so that he quickly discerns that he is being tricked. “He, the one who banished you from heaven and delivered to destruction, commands you through me — disappear!”<sup>254</sup> he orders them. Another costume malfunction, this time by The Principal (Главный) — a devil pretending to be Jesus Christ — who forgets to cover his chicken feet with the garment, is blamed for their disastrous performance. Having failed to convince the Ascetic, the “actors” are banished to hell and the demons must think of other ways to torture him. This outcome differs from that of the same scene in the *Patericon*, where the devils succeed in fooling Isaakii, who “came out of his cell and prostrated himself before the demons’ handiwork as though before Christ.”<sup>255</sup>

The portrayal of the devils and especially demons, who are, after all, the main characters of the play, draws inspiration from secular literature. “What kind of an apocrypha does not have a demon!”<sup>256</sup> Remizov wrote in his memoirs, *With Trimmed Eyes* [Podstrizhennymi glazami]

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<sup>252</sup> Remizov, *Besovskoe deistvo*, 15.

<sup>253</sup> Sergei Smirnov, *Kak sluzhili miru podvizhniki drevnei Rusi?* (Sergiev Posad: Sviato-Troitskaia Sergieva Lavra, 1903), 21.

<sup>254</sup> Remizov, *Besovskoe deistvo*, 26-27.

<sup>255</sup> Muriel Heppell, trans., *The Paterik of the Kievan Caves Monastery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 206.

<sup>256</sup> Remizov, vol. 8 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 119.

(1933-1946) many years later. The theater critic Vladimir Kranichfeld, who attended the play's premiere, remembered how overwhelming the abundance of squealing devils felt onstage.<sup>257</sup> *Comedy* reaffirmed Remizov's nickname as a "specialist on devils," which he received after the success of his short story, "The Little Devil" [Chertik], published earlier that year in *Zolotoe runo*. Many of his contemporaries even remarked that, physically, Remizov resembled a gnome or some fairytale creature from Slavic folklore. Maksimilian Voloshin, for instance, compared the playwright to an exiled and humiliated god-turned-devil residing in a box, who delights in startling children.<sup>258</sup> In his poem, "Swamp Imps" [Bolotnye cherteniutki] (1905), which is dedicated to Remizov, Blok writes about the affinity between the two of them by way of their mutual connection to the earth, nature, and shared pagan past:

Here we sit together on the moss  
In the midst of swamps.  
Our third companion is a half-crest moon above  
With its curled mouth.

I am just like you, a child of the groves,  
My face is also obliterated.  
Quieter than water and lower than grass —  
One wretched devil.<sup>259</sup>

Although Blok refers to both of them as "devils" in the sense that they are creatures of the forest and pagan heritage, for Remizov the difference between a demon (демон) and devil (бес, черт) was substantial. This is how Remizov's biographical novel, *Iveren'* (1955), presents two writers whom he greatly admired: "Once upon a time [...] in the land of Moscow there lived two

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<sup>257</sup> Vladimir Kranichfeld, "Literaturnye otkliki," *Sovremennyi mir* 1 (January 1908): 88.

<sup>258</sup> Maksimilian Voloshin, "Aleksei Remizov," in *Putnik po vseleennyi* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1990), 181 and 184.

<sup>259</sup> Blok, vol. 2 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 10, lines 5-12.

demons: Leonid Andreev and Valerii Briusov.”<sup>260</sup> From this perspective, Remizov’s demons are always artists, whereas devils are only impish meddlers.<sup>261</sup>

“A comedy of the devils begins. Devils are whirling and singing in a terrible chorus,” state the authorial directions. “Everything is turning, everything is spinning, everything is being crushed by the chaotic dance, which whirls faster and closer so that the devils start falling off like pieces; as they tumble, crawl to the cave, and cling to it — they do God-knows-what; and in the monotonous roar of this chorus, their distinct voices ring liked outstretched arms.”<sup>262</sup> This is a description of the second performance, which takes place immediately after the Ascetic banishes the troupe of “angels” to hell. The chaotic scene of devils of all sorts suggests a theater where actors and chorus are united in their performance. It reflects Remizov’s view on theater at that time, which coincided with Viacheslav Ivanov’s concept of the *choric* (соборный) theater. This notion of theater as ritual that goes back to the theater’s Greek origins emphasizes the power of myth, initiation, and, in combination with the chorus, thus attains the apex of one’s ultimate creative freedom. “A sacred mystery play will be revived,” Remizov writes about his vision of the mystery play, “with both the actor and the viewer becoming one, united in ecstasy, coming together in one act, one feeling.”<sup>263</sup>

This second performance of devils surrounding Isaakii also comes from the *Patericon*, where the scene is given in a much-attenuated version. The chaotic dances in the original text

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<sup>260</sup> Aleksei Remizov, vol. 8 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 434.

<sup>261</sup> Alla Gracheva, “Aleksei Remizov i Leonid Andreev (Vvedenie k teme).” In *Aleksei Remizov: issledovaniia i materialy*, ed. Alla Gracheva (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1994), 48.

<sup>262</sup> Remizov, *Besovskoe deistvo*, 27.

<sup>263</sup> Remizov, “Tovarishchestvo novoi dramy. Pis’mo iz Khersona,” *Vesy* 4 (1904): 36-37.

commence to the sounds of pipes, lutes, and drums that mock and eventually exhaust Isaakii.<sup>264</sup> For Remizov, however, this demonic theater is the central performance of his drama, unlike in the *Patericon* where it is secondary to the one that manages to fool Isaakii. Both performances — the first with the devils dressed as angels and the second with the chaotic dance of the devils — rely on a play-within-a-play construct that reminds the audience about the show in progress. The latter is enhanced by the participation of the audience, which interrupts the performance on several occasions in a fashion similar to that of the tireless Author from Blok’s *The Puppet Show*. “Fix the tail!”<sup>265</sup> Voice from the Audience (Голос из публики) cries out on one occasion, thereby ostensibly eliminating the fourth wall — a principle of the *conditional* (условный) theater that Remizov and Meyerhold promoted during their collaboration at the Fellowship of the New Drama from 1902-1905. From posing as holy people to sending an acting troupe to see if the Ascetic can recognize the actors for who they are, the demons provoke the Ascetic to engage in their theater. “We will have difficulties with him,” Aratyr’ foreshadows. “He is a saint!”

Despite Remizov’s play being set during the early years of the Ascetic’s monasticism, some form of religious community already exists around the Ascetic as evidenced by the appearances of various visitors, which include Gatekeeper (Привратник), Pilgrim (Странник), and Brother Evstratii (Страстный брат Евстратий), with the latter arriving at the monastery to fight the temptations of the flesh. The Ascetic’s monasticism is characterized by a constant state of conflict between his old and new selves that remains unresolved until the end of his life.<sup>266</sup> He

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<sup>264</sup> Heppell, 206.

<sup>265</sup> Remizov, *Besovskoe deistvo*, 16.

<sup>266</sup> The Ascetic’s life, stemming from his devotion to the cross and veneration of suffering endured for the Orthodox faith, develops into a model for the central characters in Remizov’s next three plays: Judas in *The Tragedy of Judas, Prince of Iscariot* [Tragediia o Iude, printse Iskariotskom] (1908), George in *The Comedy of George the Brave* [Deistvo o Georgii Khrabrom] (1910), and Tsar Maksimilian’s Christian son, Adol’f, in *Tsar Maksimilian* [Tsar’ Maksimilian] (1919). (Gerasimov, “Teatr Alekseia Remizova,” 184-185.)

is trapped in a state where, as Turner would have it, “transition has become a permanent condition.”<sup>267</sup> Incidentally, whilst Remizov’s Ascetic dies the death of a saint, Isaakii survives and continues fighting temptations. The Ascetic’s ordeals, in fact, are reminiscent of Khoma Brut’s ordeal at the end of *Vii*. Both Khoma and the Ascetic are figures of religious authority who have been left alone to recite prayers while demonic forces incessantly attack them. Although the souls of Khoma and the Ascetic swiftly depart this world at the end, the monsters that attacked Khoma remain frozen in the church whereas the arrival of Death, in the Ascetic’s case, interrupts the celebration and arrests the performance — at least for the public — as the curtain finally comes down.

Remizov’s portrayal of the two demons as they torture the Ascetic transcends their presentation as purely evil and instead individuates and humanizes them. Remizov depicts the duo, with their cohort of devils and masks, as the show’s producers, contemporary satyrs, and masters of ceremonies who parade around in business suits, read newspapers, and recite revolutionary slogans, all-the-while competing for power and promotions. Such a presentation does not exactly contradict the depiction of devils as mischiefs in the *Patericon*, but it makes these demons two-dimensional characters.<sup>268</sup> The portrayal also remains in line with Bakhtin’s analysis of the western medieval devils whom the scholar regards as products of the popular grotesque culture of the Middle Ages. Epistemon’s ghostly vision in Rabelais’s novel, for example, identifies them as “excellent and jovial fellows.”<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 107.

<sup>268</sup> The influence of Goethe’s *Faust* and Gogol’s Ukrainian tales on Remizov’s demons and devils has also been widely acknowledged. For Goethe: see Remizov’s Vol. 10 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 372; For Gogol’: see Natal’ia Blishch’s *A.M. Remizov i russkaia literatura XIX-XX vv.: retsepsiia, refleksii, avtorefleksia* (2013).

<sup>269</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 41.

*Comedy* introduces a type of theater that originates in Hell — where the acting troupe is assembled — and thereby references the medieval belief that entertainment stems from the devil. The performance takes place near a monastery — a spiritual sanctuary where the recluse is able to cure himself of temptation — and subverts the Ascetic’s sacrament of the holy orders.<sup>270</sup> Ernest Turig, who was entrusted with convincing the imperial censors to allow the stage production, succeeded only after reassuring the censor that *Comedy* was to be staged as a Yuletide Divination (святочное гаданье).<sup>271</sup> In this regard, Remizov, who was not a stranger to anti-government protests, may have employed the medieval genre in his play’s title as a kind-of safety net. The ambivalent nature of the carnival — in the performances of the devils and the pagan masks — serves as both a temporary release from structure and an event that ensures this structure’s continuity. Scholars, however, ascribe the trope of demonic action within the context of Remizov’s *oeuvre* to revolution, which is always perceived in his texts as an unnatural step in Russia’s development.

*Comedy of the Devils* opened on December 4, 1907 at the Komissarzhevskaja Theater in St. Petersburg, three days ahead of Evreinov’s Ancient Theater. The event attracted much attention, largely because of Meyerhold’s sudden departure from the theater (and the project of producing Remizov’s *Comedy*) a month earlier due to creative differences with the theater’s director. This production gave the theatergoers their first taste of medieval stylizations. It is no surprise, therefore, that only a few recognized how the play, which closed after its fifth performance, attempted to restore forgotten forms of popular medieval theater. Dobuzhinskii recounted how, at the end of one performance, he and Remizov “bravely” showed up onstage to

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<sup>270</sup> Smirnov, 71.

<sup>271</sup> Ernest Turig, “Khozhdenie po tsenzurnym mukam,” in *Rusaliia*, 44-46.

thundering sounds of applause, whistles, and angry shouts.<sup>272</sup> Toward the end of his life, Remizov largely dismissed his efforts as a playwright, which included four plays and one libretto for the ballet, but he still set his first play apart from the others. “What is there left to say? *Comedy of the Devils* — my theater and my *rusalias* were a miss,” he wrote. “Who remembers or even heard about *Comedy of the Devils*?”<sup>273</sup>

In one of his early manifestos on the nature of symbolist theater, Remizov declares that theater must return to its origins and go beyond its function to entertain. “Theater is a cult, a mass, in the sacraments of which there is perhaps a hidden atonement,” he states. “A new drama dreams about this kind of theater.”<sup>274</sup> For Remizov, such theater is, first and foremost, a ritual. Meyerhold praised Remizov’s efforts and considered *Comedy* as the most successful contemporary attempt at creating “a perfect mystery play” (“совершенная мистерия”) within a genuinely Russian tradition.<sup>275</sup> Remizov’s determination to fight western influences on the development of Russian theatrical art shaped his choices for this, his first play, which he set during the times of early anchorites. Although it would be too simplistic to interpret this play as political allegory, Kranichfeld, for example, was quick to label the work a topical caricature (злободневный шарж) and over-interpreted the duel between Life and Death as an example of an unjust political trial and a young man’s (the Ascetic’s) failure to remain by his master’s (Life’s) side as an analogy of the Russian people’s betrayal of their leaders.<sup>276</sup> Such an interpretation of *Comedy* is as far-fetched as the one Mariia Beketova recounts in her memoirs,

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<sup>272</sup> Dobuzhinskii, 232.

<sup>273</sup> Remizov, vol. 10 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 254.

<sup>274</sup> Remizov, “Tovarishchestvo novoi dramy,” 37.

<sup>275</sup> Meyerhold, 188.

<sup>276</sup> Kranichfeld, 87-88.

how Colombina from Blok's *The Puppet Show* was interpreted by some as a symbol of a long-awaited constitution.<sup>277</sup> One can, for example, argue that Remizov is doing something that the imperial court is doing during these years — deploying the whole ritual package — the morality play as such — as a way of warning people about the dangers of revolution and the way one can guard oneself against it (through the sort of ritualized life depicted by the Ascetic). The concept of an ongoing *deistvo* orchestrated by devils is a motif that unequivocally suggests the presence of a revolutionary impulse. Remizov's later works, according to Alla Gracheva, develop this idea more explicitly into an image of a whirlwind that destroys everything in its path and metamorphoses into a mad demonic dance that threatens the divine world order.<sup>278</sup> In this respect, *Comedy* not only reflected society's fears and anxieties but also set a precedent for other playwrights to address the social issues of the period through the genre of medieval drama.

#### 4.2. *Quest in Aleksandr Blok's The Song of Fate (1908)*

The moment of revelation for Hermann, the protagonist on a self-imposed quest for a mysterious unknown from Aleksandr Blok's *The Song of Fate* [*Pesnia Sud'by*] (1908), comes in Act 5, when he identifies his plight with that of a medieval warrior.<sup>279</sup> Much like an actor who is about to make his entrance onto the stage, Hermann transports himself to the times of the Golden Horde. "I remember the terrible day of the battle of Kulikovo," he begins his lengthy monologue. "The Prince took his stand with his bodyguard on the hill, the earth trembled from the creaking

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<sup>277</sup> Mariia Beketova, *Aleksandr Blok. Biograficheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Kniga po trebovaniu, 2013), 48.

<sup>278</sup> Alla Gracheva, *Aleksei Remizov i drevnerusskaia kul'tura* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2000), 67 and 128.

<sup>279</sup> D. Maksimov, P. Medvedev, I. Lotman, V. Orlov, and A. Turkov published extensively on Blok's life and works. Their scholarship acknowledges the influences of Blok's earlier poetic cycles — *The Snow Mask* [*Snezhnaia maska*] (1907) and *Faina* (1906-8) — on *The Song of Fate*. Popular approaches to studying the play include analysis of the relationship between the poet and Russia and the failure of integration between people (*narod*) and elites (*intelligentsia*).

of the Tatar wagons, the crying of the eagles threatened misfortune.”<sup>280</sup> Hermann paints the stage that has been set for the performance of great historical magnitude and acknowledges the dangerous state that he has been navigating ever since he left the safety of his former life. “I am on the threshold of Insanity,” he declares, “or of recovery of my sight!”<sup>281</sup> His identification with a soldier from the troops headed by Prince Dmitrii Donskoi engenders the concept of the eternal battle that never ended. This battle changes Hermann from a pensive poet into a soldier and recasts the object of his search as a Russia that he must defend from the Tatars as he anticipates joining the military conflict. “Everything that was,” Hermann continues, “everything that is to be — has surrounded me: it is as if in these days I were living the life of all times, living with the tortures of my country.”<sup>282</sup>

Hermann’s pursuit of the mysterious woman sends him on a journey that has all the hallmarks of a hero’s quest.<sup>283</sup> Although he starts out not knowing his destination, he comprehends the journey’s purpose by the time he reaches the Kulikovo Field. The recreation of a real historical event that becomes the final and most important stop for Hermann enhances the process of reflexivity, which takes place, as Turner suggests, when the meaning of the past is assessed by reference to the present and the present by reference to the past.<sup>284</sup> The Battle of Kulikovo represents the sacred center that connects Hermann’s personal transformation with the realization for the need for national awakening.

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<sup>280</sup> Aleksandr Blok, *The Song of Fate*, trans. Oleta Joan O’Connor and George Rapall Noyes, *Poet Lore* 1 (1938): 30.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> “Quest” or “hero’s journey” is a mytheme that has been explored at some length by anthropologists and literary specialists such as Edward Taylor, Joseph Campbell, Vladimir Propp, Lord Raglan, and others.

<sup>284</sup> Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 98.

The play consists of seven acts that detail Hermann's travels during a calendar year. Act 1 begins on a cold Saturday in April at the idyllic abode where Hermann lives with his wife, Elena, and his mother. The arrival of a monk functions as the *deus ex machina* that disrupts this family's peaceful existence. After the monk tells the story about a mysterious woman named Faina, who sings a "song of fate," Hermann decides that he must find her and leaves his family. After his departure in Act 2, the monk conveys Elena the story of his own failed search for Faina, which foreshadows Hermann's quest for the unattainable goal. The monk depicts Faina as the femme fatale who is bored by ordinary people and who waits for somebody to come and rescue her from the company of her much older companion, who, as Zara Mints, suggests, channels the evil sorcerer from Nikolai Gogol's *The Terrible Vengeance*.<sup>285</sup> Hermann and Faina meet several times during his travels: at the city's world trade exhibition (Act 3); at Faina's artistic salon (Act 4); during the Battle of Kulikovo (Act 5); and after the battle (Act 7). In Act 6, the monk returns to Hermann's empty house, where his mother died during his absence and his wife is growing restless; his purpose is to bless Elena to leave and search for her husband. The biblical analogies, such as those between Hermann's journey and that of Christ, or the departures of Hermann and Elena and the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, suggest that the play is influenced by the genre of medieval mystery plays. Act 7 takes place in the bucolic countryside, sometime after the Battle of Kulikovo has ended, during the late winter or early spring: Faina arrives to find Hermann, who is disoriented and oblivious to his previous feats, sitting alone in a snowy field. Shocked by his helplessness and apathy, Faina realizes her mistake for deciding once that he was her savior. She bids him farewell and returns to her companion, leaving

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<sup>285</sup> Zara Mints, *Aleksandr Blok i russkie pisateli*, vol. 2, *Blok i russkii simbolizm* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2000), 315.

Hermann to doze off in the blizzard from which he is rescued by a passing peddler who offers to show him the way.

*The Song of Fate* is written mostly in poetic prose and is set in a recognizable world: characters represent certain societal tendencies and seemingly real places are populated with everyday people. In this respect Blok uses the social realities of the time in a fashion similar to Andrei Belyi's *The Silver Dove* [Serebrianyi golub'] (1909) and *Petersburg* [Peterburg] (1913). Blok initially defined the genre of his play as a "dramatic prologue," but about a decade later, after he refined the original version and added new scenes, he changed the genre to a "dramatic poem."<sup>286</sup> The work's original genre of "prologue" allows it to be studied as a beginning of or an entrance into a circle that represents the main character's world.<sup>287</sup> By the same token, Blok's vision of Rus' in peril as a circular, occluded world permeates much of his prose and poetry of that period.<sup>288</sup> Hermann's voyage begins on Lazarus Saturday, the day that in the liturgical calendar precedes Palm Sunday and celebrates Lazarus' return from dead. This holiday further signifies the possibility of the resurrection of someone other than Christ and thus alludes to humanity's resurrection within Christ, all of which symbolically imbue Hermann's departure with a sense of greater purpose.<sup>289</sup>

In the foreword to the first edition of his 1912 cycle, *On the Field of Kulikovo*, Blok explains his fascination with this battle by noting that it was one of Russian history's "symbolic

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<sup>286</sup> Blok, vol. 4 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 581-582.

<sup>287</sup> Nikolai Volkov, *Aleksandr Blok i teatr* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, 1926), 87.

<sup>288</sup> Dmitrii Maksimov, *Poeziia i proza Aleksandra Bloka* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1981), 91.

<sup>289</sup> Blok referenced this religious holiday in the poem "Lazarus Saturday" [Verbnaia Subbota] (1903), which also depicts a dream-like world where the borders between earth and sky are effortlessly transgressed.

events” that had yet to be explained and was destined to reoccur.<sup>290</sup> This play is a departure from the symbolism of Blok’s early years, when his work was replete with other types of medieval allusions, the best known of which was his presentation of the Eternal Feminine as a figure promoting the chivalric code and courtly love. Mints writes that 1907 through the beginning of 1909 was a complex period in the writer’s life, evident through his reaction to the revolution of 1905, which redefined his world view.<sup>291</sup> Thus Hermann may be regarded as an alter-ego of Blok himself; a character who feels guilty for belonging to the closed-off, Western world of the intellectual elite and who sees his redemption by integrating himself into the world of the peasantry. During those years, the topic of the Battle of Kulikovo became a vehicle that developed in Blok’s *oeuvre* into an idiosyncratic “trilogy” that aimed at connecting nation and individual. *The Song of Fate* was preceded by a lecture, “Russia and elites” [Rossiia i intelligentsiia] before the Religious and Philosophical Society of St. Petersburg, in which Blok compared *narod* (people) and *intelligentsia* (elites) to the Russian and Tatar camps. *On the Field of Kulikovo* followed several years later and was immediately recognized as one of the poet’s highest achievements.<sup>292</sup>

Blok’s Hermann embarks on his journey in spring, that is, the season that stimulates a desire for renewal and rebirth. The ritual quest is a highly formalized and structured folk genre that enters both into the literary canon of antiquity (e.g., the Argonauts, or to some extent the

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<sup>290</sup> Blok, vol. 3 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 587.

<sup>291</sup> Zara Mints, *Poetika Aleksandra Bloka*, vol. 1, *Blok i russkii simvolizm* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1999), 496.

<sup>292</sup> Blok scholarship acknowledges the influences of the poet’s earlier poetic cycles — *The Snow Mask* [Snezhnaia maska] (1907) and *Faina* (1906-1908) — on *The Song of Fate*. Popular approaches to studying the play include analysis of the relationship between the poet and Russia and the failure of integration between people (*narod*) and elites (*intelligentsia*). Blok returned to the civic theme of the artist and *narod* several times later in his career, for instance, in *The Scythians* [Skify] and *The Twelve* [Dvenadsat’] (1918).

quests of Ulysses or Aeneas), and also into the medieval canon (the quest for the Holy Grail in particular). Hermann must rely on Faina to guide him. His pursuit of her will ultimately lead him to the Kulikovo Field, which is where a conflation of Faina and Kulikovo will take place.

Throughout the process, Hermann gradually becomes a product of the encounters between him and Faina. Each of these encounters has an initiatory quality. “You beat me with a lash,” he tells her. “You poisoned me with a kiss. You came to me in dreams each night. You hurled a scarlet ribbon over the precipice to me.”<sup>293</sup> The contact with the Other (Faina) leaves him branded so that toward the end of his journey he remembers nothing of his life before Faina’s lash. Like a character from Russian fairytales, Hermann is a wanderer who seeks out something about which he knows nothing, and it is only after he imagines the legendary battle of Kulikovo that he finally comprehends the purpose of his journey. The arrival of the monk, who is an inherently liminal figure, in his home leads Hermann to quite willingly abandon the safety of his former life for the allure of the unknown and navigate a world that is perilous and uncertain. A memory of the old bloodsheds defines this world, as pointed out by Faina, when she references the old-believers killing themselves in protest in speaking about “the night when the forefathers were burning.”<sup>294</sup> Hermann becomes a mystic — a different kind than the mystics ridiculed in Blok’s *The Puppet Show* — who experiences the type of gradual enlightenment that enables him to learn lessons from history. It is no coincidence then that the corporeal aspects of Hermann’s journey, such as his appearance or hardships, are uniformly overlooked in favor of symbolic ones, namely, the qualities that are ascribed to the journey itself as it is undertaken by both an individual (Hermann) and the collective (Faina as Russia).

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<sup>293</sup> Blok, *The Song of Fate*, 32.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

“I am not alone!” Hermann cries right before he is about to enter the Battle of Kulikovo. “I did not leave of my own accord! The wind summoned me, it sang me a song; I am in terrible agitation, as before some heroic deed!”<sup>295</sup> Wind attains metaphysical qualities as a force of nature that carries Faina’s song and guides Hermann toward her. As he reaches the battlefield, Hermann the soldier realizes the magnitude of this historical bloodshed as he watches the princely banner move down from the hill and the first soldiers to lose their lives: “When a monk and a Tatar were the first to fall dead, the hosts came to blows, and the whole day they fought, slashed at each other, gnashed at each other.”<sup>296</sup> Although he is still waiting to take a part in this theater of war, he is surrounded by others who also patiently await their turn. This recognition of belonging to a group of like-minded individuals temporarily transforms Hermann’s largely solitary trip into a type of communal experience.

Hermann undergoes a change in status that enables him to shed his old identity of a wandering poet, which is evident when, in a moment of believing that he is the one who came to rescue her, Faina calls out: “Prince! Friend! Bridegroom!”<sup>297</sup> Not only is Hermann transformed into a soldier and Faina into Russia, but the battle itself ceases to be a historical memory, as it is resurrected five centuries later and attains a significance of an ongoing contemporary conflict. The feeling of togetherness and common purpose binds Hermann to his ancestors and creates the state of comradeship for everyone who took part in this military conflict. “God! I know how each one of those idle soldiers felt,” Hermann acknowledges their connection as he exclaims in agony of not being able to fight just yet, “how each heart begged for work, and it was still early,

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

early!”<sup>298</sup> It is through his participation in the military conflict that Hermann’s personal search for a mysterious woman becomes the national quest for liberated Rus’, his *axis mundi*, which simultaneously exists in the past, present, and future.

Blok’s decision to make the Battle of Kulikovo the turning point in the character’s journey was influenced by the legends of this fourteenth-century battle, which fascinated chroniclers, historians, writers, and artists for hundreds of years. The surge of interest in the Battle of Kulikovo in the beginning of the twentieth century suggests the connections that intellectuals recognized between medieval and contemporary conflicts.<sup>299</sup> Historians tend to agree that the battle became a rite of passage for the country with soldiers leaving for Kulikovo as representatives of their respective principalities but returning as Russians. The nature of this battle that redefined national identity, according to Sergei Solov’ev, was inherently medieval in the context of Western European war culture. “Chroniclers say that a battle such as Kulikovo never before happened in Rus’,” he writes. “Battles of this kind took place in the Western part of Europe at the beginning of the so-called Middle Ages, during the great migration of peoples, during the terrible clashes between European and Asian militias.”<sup>300</sup> Solov’ev draws on the battle’s significance as a “fortress” against the Mongols and compares it to the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains in 451 and the Battle of Tursko in 1241. The legacy of the Battle of Kulikovo reemerges through this symbolic reading of history, which emphasizes the urgency to act and suggests a need for a ruler of Donskoi’s caliber at a time when the country is in the hands of a weak tsar. The propensity to glorify important military conflicts of the past can be explained in

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<sup>298</sup> Blok, *The Song of Fate*, 31.

<sup>299</sup> See Andrei Robinson’s *Kulikovskaia bitva v literature i iskusstve* (1980) or Kiril Reznikov’s “Kulikovskaia bitva kak utverzhdaushchii mif” in *Russkaia istoriia: mify i fakty. Ot rozhdeniia slavian do pokoreniia Sibiri* (2012).

<sup>300</sup> Sergei Solov’ev, “Kniazhenie Dimitriia Ioannovicha Donskogo (1362-1389),” in *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, Vol. 1-5, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia pol’za, 1896), 980.

part through their appeal as powerful historical performances. The Battle of Kulikovo is one such example. Schechner proposes to consider the concept of the *aftermath* (or “continuing life of a performance”) as the final stage of these performances. He asserts that aftermaths can stretch indefinitely and generate myriads of “new” performances in which the “source” from which they originated no longer matters as the original event becomes absorbed into a collective performed memory.<sup>301</sup>

The decision to place national issues over personal obligations justify Hermann’s decision to leave his home. The monk, who is responsible for Hermann’s departure, delineates to Elena the urgency of taking action as opposed to remaining idle: “But is it possible for a living man to exist peacefully now?” He asks. “Everything entirely crushes a living man: he looks around him — there are only the tears of men.”<sup>302</sup> Such a grim depiction of the world echoes Faina’s pleas for a storm, which comes to symbolize a looming political conflict. In accepting his readiness to act, once he is called, Hermann expresses his readiness to join the battle: “This is why I cannot sleep at night,” he says. “I await, with all my heart, the man who shall come and say: ‘Thine hour has struck! It is time!’”<sup>303</sup> Hermann’s wait is finally over after he and Faina reunite on the battlefield. Once Faina sees him as a medieval warrior eager to fight for his country, she finally commands him to act. “You are he for whom I have waited,” she exclaims. “The swan cries, the trumpet calls! The hour has struck! Come!”<sup>304</sup>

Theirs is a relationship that fundamentally enlightens one (Hermann) through the encounter with the Other (Faina). The relationship that develops as a result of Hermann’s

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<sup>301</sup> Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 246-249.

<sup>302</sup> Blok, *The Song of Fate*, 34.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

decision to make his life more meaningful and fulfilling is suggestive of what Martin Buber refers to as the absolute encounter with the Eternal Thou, which initiates Hermann's personal transformation.<sup>305</sup> Hermann sets out on his quest precisely for this type of cathartic experience after he realizes that something important is missing in his life. The Battle of Kulikovo uncovers the true purpose of his journey — to protect Rus' — and in the process instills in him a sense of new responsibility toward the fate of his country. The concrete event of post-Kievan Rus' thus attains a sacred quality as it comes to represent the most meaningful encounter between two main characters, Hermann and Faina. The concepts of the eternal wait and an ongoing battle communicate the feeling, which Blok would later identify in his famous poetic cycle *On the Field of Kulikovo*, as that of the century-old sadness. The same feeling permeates this play but the focus here is not on the battle of the past or the battle of the future but on the desire of the individual (Hermann) to grasp the significance of one historical event.

The sound of the trumpets in the distance signals the end of Hermann's historical vision and returns him to the real, non-Kulikovo present. What follows afterwards can be described as the process of intense personal reflection on the meaning of the witnessed battle, which Hermann likens to the process of undergoing the Christian sacrament of baptism: "I seem to be baptized a second time," he exclaims, "Christened again in some cold, snowy font."<sup>306</sup> The Battle of Kulikovo attains the power of a religious sacra so typical of the completion of a quest, a miracle that the hero — in this case, Hermann — finally experiences. Through his participation in the battle, he is transformed into a nationally conscious citizen but this transformation is short-lived. After leaving the shrine (i.e. exiting the battle), Hermann has no memory of his past life or of the

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<sup>305</sup> See Martin Buber's comments on the "I-Thou" relationship in *I and Thou* [Ich und Du] (1923).

<sup>306</sup> Blok, *The Song of Fate*, 37.

battle itself: “I see nothing.” He says. “I remember nothing.”<sup>307</sup> The only thing that Hermann still recalls after the battle is Faina’s lash, which, he says, deafened him and killed his past. Faina realizes that Hermann was not prepared for the spiritual awakening which was bestowed upon him and makes several attempts to help him remember, but Hermann is not interested. “It is all the same!” he tells her. “Do not waken me! Let another man find the road.”<sup>308</sup> Faina realizes that she has made a mistake by thinking that Hermann was the one for whom she waited all this time: “You were a man,” she tells him, “only so long as your face was covered with blood!”<sup>309</sup> Their co-dependence illustrates an unhealthy and manipulated relationship that leaves each of them in dire circumstances: Faina returns under the control of her older companion, and Hermann is left to die in a blizzard. The final episode, which is often interpreted as Blok’s prophecy of the future integration of people and elites, introduces the last character of the play, the peddler (коробейник), who miraculously appears just in time to save Hermann. Since the purpose of a quest is not only undergo a spiritual rebirth but also to sustain it, not simply to find the object of one’s quest but also to return home, Hermann’s failure to do so, leaves this medieval enterprise incomplete.

Blok’s decision to send his play to MKhAT’s Konstantin Stanislavskii instead of Meyerhold, who successfully staged *The Puppet Show* several years before, illustrates a shift in the writer’s theatrical views. He subsequently referred to having to choose between two producers as a choice between “two truths.”<sup>310</sup> The desire to distance himself from “*meyerholdia*” — as Blok named the craze of avant-garde dramas that swept through the

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Blok, vol. 7 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 187.

theatrical scene — communicates the desire for “healthy realism” during this period of his life.<sup>311</sup> Although Stanislavskii rejected the play, he appreciated the work for its literary merit — “poetry and temperament” — but not for its dramatic organization.<sup>312</sup> A frequent critique regarding *The Song of Fate* in Blok scholarship has to do with the absence of substantial dramatic conflicts, a so called “drama without drama.”<sup>313</sup> In his letter to the playwright, Stanislavskii voiced another concern: “I am bothered that the action takes place in Russia! Why?”<sup>314</sup> In his often-quoted response to the theatrical maître from December 9 (22), 1908, Blok passionately defended his decision to make Russia and its history the focus of his work. “My theme,” he writes, “and I know this firmly without any doubt — is a living, real theme. It is not only bigger than me but it is bigger than all of us; and it is our common theme. [...] *the theme about Russia* [...] To this theme I deliberately and irrevocably *devote my life*.”<sup>315</sup> The result became a decade-long work on the play about a wanderer who looks to an episode from the national history for answers.

The object of Hermann’s adventure is threefold: a woman (on the level of the plot), a country (on the sociocultural level — looking for the real Russia), and a symbol (the Battle of Kulikovo) that is commensurate with the seriousness of the quest. This quest turns into a commentary on a society in crisis. Blok’s decision to focus on the historical event as a reflex of a sociopolitical situation presents this society as undergoing its own rite of passage. Hermann’s failure to sustain the spiritual renewal that he endures during the battle, as well as him being left outside of any social structure at the end of the play, represent the inverted ritual scheme of his

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<sup>311</sup> Aleksandr Blok, *Zapisnye knizhki. 1901-1920* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 209.

<sup>312</sup> Konstantin Stanislavskii, vol. 7, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Kniga po trebovaniuu, 2012), 279.

<sup>313</sup> Pavel Medvedev, *Dramy i poemy Aleksandra Bloka* (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo pisatelei, 1928), 58.

<sup>314</sup> Stanislavskii, 280.

<sup>315</sup> Blok, vol. 8 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 265. Original italics.

spiritual quest. As the initiand with knowledge that others do not possess, he escapes the net of social structure, enters a mythical society, but, paradoxically, cannot find his way home. The author's decision to depict this battle as an important — but hardly final — step in defeating the Golden Horde becomes a metaphor for an ongoing battle whose ultimate performance has yet to take place. This is a battle that transcends the historical conflict of Slavs against the Tatars (or Europe against Asia). In the closing lines of his response to Stanislavskii, Blok compares his vision of the play's potential performance onstage to a lash that can terminate the hibernation of society.<sup>316</sup> Like Faina's lash that sends Hermann on his journey through mythical Rus' to uncover something that only a select few can recognize, Blok's depiction of the poet's search for a country that continuously eludes him and which is stuck in a raging warfare represents the poet's engagement with the sociopolitical situation and his desire to awaken the nation from a deep sleep.

#### 4.3. *Trial in Leonid Andreev's Tsar Hunger (1908)*

“Ladies and gentlemen! Permit me to welcome you to the court of justice,” announces the play's eponymous character during the scene of “The Trial of the Hungry” (Суд над голодными) in Leonid Andreev's *Tsar Hunger* [Tsar' Golod] (1908).<sup>317</sup> “We have gathered here to judge the hungry. Therefore, we are dressed in wigs and mantles, are seated at this elevated table, and have below us a secretary with a large goose-pen.”<sup>318</sup> From here on, the fate of

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 267. Original italics.

<sup>317</sup> Leonid Afonin, Liudmila Iezuitova, Iulia Babicheva, Viacheslav Grechnev, and Boris Bugrov are the scholars who worked extensively on Andreev's life and works. *Tsar Hunger* is usually studied within the context of Andreev's expressionist *oeuvre* as the example of medieval allegory.

<sup>318</sup> Leonid Andreev, *King Hunger*, trans. Eugene M. Kayden (Sewanee: The University of the South, 1973), 52-53.

humanity rests in the hands of the play's ruthless judge, Tsar Hunger<sup>319</sup>, who, in the words of Boris Bugrov, symbolizes the material and human instincts that govern humankind, such as its desire of satiety.<sup>320</sup> During this scene, which occupies the entirety of Act 3, Tsar Hunger transforms himself into the master of ceremonies by putting workers, beggars, prostitutes, and the homeless on trial. As the director, he is in charge of organizing the acting troupe. As the leading actor, the spotlight is on him: he lowers and raises his voice, theatrically covers his face, and receives applause for his performance. As the producer, he repeatedly instructs the judges to look as natural as possible in their roles: "Honorable judges, I beg you to assume a deliberative air,"<sup>321</sup> he reminds them of their obligations. After extending his welcome to a group of judges and a jury and recapping the purpose of their gathering, Tsar Hunger orchestrates a show that gives a final glimpse of a society still intact but about to disintegrate quickly. To achieve this, he makes a mockery of the *Rechtsstaat* by transforming the judicial process into an elaborate spectacle, complete with an intermission.

The play that invites comparisons between the courtroom and the contemporary society of the Russian Empire is said to have been inspired by the peasant revolts of 1905-1907. Tsar Hunger's trial functions as a mechanism of destruction in a country that is torn by social inequality, economic hardships, religious disputes, military conflicts, famine, and prejudices. Trial becomes a rite of passage for the collective. Trial is also a stage drama that transcends its purpose to merely entertain and transforms it, as Turner would have it, into a *metacommentary*

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<sup>319</sup> Andreev borrows the title character of Tsar Hunger from Nikolai Nekrasov's poem "The Railroad" [Zheleznaia doroga] (1864). I translate the name of the title character as "Tsar" as opposed to "King" but otherwise rely on Kayden's translation.

<sup>320</sup> Boris Bugrov, *Leonid Andreev. Proza i dramaturgiia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 2000), 81.

<sup>321</sup> Andreev, *King Hunger*, 56.

on the major social dramas of the contemporary society.<sup>322</sup> The decision to put the lower classes on trial can be explained by the weakness of the depicted community and its failure to see through the manipulative techniques of the ruling system epitomized by Tsar Hunger.



Figure 21: Evgenii Lansere's illustrations of Tsar Hunger, Death, and Time.

The play consists of a prologue and five acts that depict what happens to a society when its fate rests in the hands of a ruthless tsar. The prologue begins with Tsar Hunger, Death (Смерть), and Time the Bell Ringer (Время-звонарь) stepping out of the Middle Ages and into contemporary Russia. They gather near the cathedral where Tsar Hunger decides to please Death by convincing the lower (workers) and lowest (those living in the streets) classes to stage an insurrection. The three allegorical figures remain the only individuated characters among the

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<sup>322</sup> Victor Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" in *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16. Original italics.

unnamed human “types” (workers, secretary, professor, little girl, old man, hooligan) and the caricatures (fat man, hungry man) for the duration of the play. Their portrayal, together with a mythical timeframe that can represent a single day or all of eternity — even though the play begins at the dawn of one day and ends at the dawn of another — and allusions to the Last Judgment assert the drama’s genre as a morality play. To be precise, Andreev deploys the genre in the same way as Remizov does, by presenting the drama as a type of sermon in which the main character controls the fate of humanity. Tsar Hunger visits the workers in their shops (in act 1) and the lowest classes of murderers and prostitutes (in act 2) with the purpose of convincing them to stage a revolt. Act 3 showcases the aforementioned trial of the hungry during which six defendants are found guilty and sentenced to be executed. Act 4 begins on the night of the anticipated riot, which compromises everybody’s safety and terrifies the upper classes as they behold their city’s libraries and galleries succumb to fire. After abandoning his so-called “children” on the battlefield, Tsar Hunger retreats into his role as an observer and theatrically laments their deaths. Act 5 takes place after the riot at dawn, marked in predominantly red and black colors, in the city that is covered with corpses that slowly begin to rise.<sup>323</sup>

Trials became a common literary device for plot advancement in Russian literature shortly after the introduction of the judicial reforms in 1864, which, as has historically been the case with Russia, proceeded much too slowly and failed to reach the far corners of the country even by the time of the Revolution of 1917.<sup>324</sup> During the 1905 Revolution, trials reached their peak popularity in the Russian Empire due to continuous press coverage — 84 trials in 1904 and

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<sup>323</sup> The play’s ending is reminiscent of the ending of Andreev’s novella *Red Laughter* [Krasnyi smekh] (1904).

<sup>324</sup> See, for example, Iosif Gessen’s *Sudebnaia reforma* (1905) or Harriet Murav’s *Russia’s Legal Fictions* (1998).

500 trials in 1905.<sup>325</sup> Andreev's law degree from Moscow University and his position as an assistant attorney who, as he himself wrote, failed to acquire the necessary experience to sustain his practice (since he repeatedly lost the only civil case with which he was entrusted) nonetheless explain his familiarity with the Russian legal system.<sup>326</sup> During his far more successful employment as a court reporter for *The Courier* [Kur'er], a daily newspaper of the liberal bourgeoisie published in Moscow from 1897 to 1904, Andreev covered over four hundred court proceedings. He continued working at the newspaper up until 1903, even when his feuilletons were already appearing in literary journals.<sup>327</sup> Andreev's intention, thereby, in *Tsar Hunger*, was primarily to satirize the system, whose pitfalls he, as a former attorney, knew all too well.<sup>328</sup> Thus, when Kornei Chukovskii commented that *Tsar Hunger* was written with a broom and a mop and could only be staged at Circus Ciniselli or at the Field of Mars (in St. Petersburg) but not at the theater, Andreev was delighted. The play's topsy-turvy, carnival-like world is indeed reminiscent of the people's theater of *raek*, with characters straight out of *lubok* literature.<sup>329</sup> Even Andreev's harshest critics recognized his talent in creating characters who, as Chukovskii

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<sup>325</sup> Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>326</sup> Anisimov, 106.

<sup>327</sup> Liudmila Iezuitova, *Leonid Andreev i literatura Serebriannogo veka: Izbrannye trudy* (St. Petersburg: Petropolis, 2010), 25.

<sup>328</sup> Andreev envisioned this play as a part of his dramatic cycle of tragedies, which centered on the plight of man and was only partially completed: the focus on a man's life in *Life of a Man*, on riot in *Tsar Hunger*, on God, Devil and a man in *Anathema* [Anatema] (1909). The projected cycle weaves intertextual references that confirm the authorial intention of including these works under a broad socio-philosophical arch. For example, one of the musical motifs in the beginning of act 2 in *Tsar Hunger* comes directly from *Life of a Man*: "Except for a few intervals, the strains of soft low melodies fill the rooms; only once, for a brief period, is heard the tune often played at the ball at Man's House." Liudmila Iezuitova writes that the organic continuity between these plays betrays Andreev's need to map out a circle of interrelated, "eternal" questions that needed to be answered in light of awakening national consciousness.

<sup>329</sup> Kornei Chukovskii, *Leonid Andreev bol'shoi i malen'kii* (St. Petersburg: Biuro, 1908), 25.

writes, appear to have emerged out of nightmares or from a world gone mad; characters who possess fragments or caricatures of the soul.<sup>330</sup>

The use of the judicial process as a literary device offers a rich platform for exploring social issues, while the genre of morality play provides a relatively simple dramatic paradigm for this very purpose. In her study of agitation trials in early Soviet Russia, Elizabeth Wood discovered that using litigation in literature was not an uncommon way of bringing attention to pertinent social issues. She uncovered a four-page drama, *The Trial of Vodka* (1904), a morality play published by the Aleksandr Nevskii Society of Sobriety, which teaches temperance when Vodka, “the primary defendant, tries to argue that her intention has been to help people. Conscience accuses her of lying and calls in witnesses to show the way she has ruined their lives. In the end the judges pronounce their sentence: ‘eternal banishment.’”<sup>331</sup> The verdict, which punishes the vice (Vodka) for her interference, is the play’s moral, much like the moral of Remizov’s *Comedy* is in the demotion of the scheming demons after they fail to disrupt the Ascetic’s prayer. Both works follow the rules of the genre of the morality play, which Stephen Greenblatt, in his overview of the genre’s influence on the Bard, identifies as having predictable endings aimed at illustrating “the terrible consequences of disobedience, idleness, or dissipation.”<sup>332</sup> Andreev, however, disregards these conventions when he chooses to focus on social issues that were never part of the original genre of morality plays and lets Tsar Hunger<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 23 and 31.

<sup>331</sup> Wood, 15.

<sup>332</sup> Greenblatt, 31.

<sup>333</sup> Tsar Hunger is the play’s main villain but it would be misleading to refer to him (Hunger) as a personified vice. Rather, it is a condition, having both natural and man-made causes, that leads to the circumstances documented in the play — working in factories (to avoid hunger), rebelling against the owners when exploitation leads to hunger, etc.

bask in triumph for inflicting misery and suffering. The use of judicial tactics that intend to shock, frighten, and delight the audience at the expense of human lives sheds light on the relationship between different societal hierarchies as they succumb to the dictatorial power of Tsar Hunger.

The nature of the trial in Andreev's play remains ambiguous, but it has all characteristics of a medieval trial. The legal attributes — a skull and miniature toy gallows on the table before the judges — indicate the playwright's reliance on the European court model as opposed to Russia's version of the corrupt trial.<sup>334</sup> The abbot's presence among the audience, the mantles and wigs as part of the legal dress code, and comparisons with England also allude to this being a medieval trial. Its purpose, at least during the Middle Ages, was to provide a way of integrating divine and human visions by letting God reveal guilt or innocence through various ordeals.<sup>335</sup> The trial in the play, however, emerges as neither a medieval trial by ordeal (most commonly by fire, water, or combat — the latter is depicted in the duel between Life and Death in Remizov's *Comedy*) nor as a modern trial by jury, for the jury has no real voice.<sup>336</sup> The jury is superfluous; it is the audience that grows more vocal as the trial progresses. In fact, Tsar Hunger continuously cues the audience on how to respond. "Of what use is life to you, starveling?"<sup>337</sup> He asks one of the accused. It is an audience member, however, who repeats the sentiment: "To be sure, why do

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<sup>334</sup> The corrupt court of Medieval Rus' was known as a "Shemiakin's Judgment" [Shemiakin sud] that is based on a folktale about a young man who successfully avoids his convictions by bribing the judge.

<sup>335</sup> Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 30.

<sup>336</sup> Tsar Hunger's trial mostly resembles a *trial with a jury of presentment*, which developed as a replacement for the trials by ordeal and evolved into trial by jury during the course of the early thirteenth century. The purpose of a jury of presentment was to "indict felons, that is, to testify that named individuals were generally believed to have committed felonies." (Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, 137).

<sup>337</sup> Andreev, *King Hunger*, 55.

they live on? I can't understand it."<sup>338</sup> Tsar Hunger commits a transgression in the courtroom by acting both as a rational authority and an instigator of conflicts. He is the one who credits himself with making people indifferent to the suffering of the accused, and fairly soon to that of humankind. "Everyone who comes here becomes [the people's] eternal enemy," says Tsar Hunger. "I demoralize them. I train them in abominations. I gnaw into the very core of their existence, filling it with decay and death. They have already ceased to discern the truth, and this is the beginning of death"<sup>339</sup> Whether one chooses to look at Andreev's trial as a way of archaizing a modern ritual (trial by jury) or as modernizing medieval ritual, it functions as a rite of passage for the collective that moves from a state of uncertainty to complete disintegration.

"How interesting! Just like a stage!"<sup>340</sup> Exclaims one of the jury members at the beginning of the court ritual. Indeed, the setting, which is supposed to resemble a courtroom at the beginning of the act, has more in common with a theater than with a process of civil litigation. The trial commences with Tsar Hunger's opening remarks; it is followed by three convictions, an intermission with a ravenous feast, three more convictions, and Tsar Hunger's closing remarks; after which it concludes with a celebration.<sup>341</sup> The intentional theatricality of this fictional trial articulates the agonistic nature of litigation and presents the courtroom as the place that exists outside of everyday structures. The jury's chants, thunderous applause, random announcements, and lofty speeches enhance the atmosphere of this being a spectacle, which continues without witness testimonies or lawful deliberations. Like the actors who are

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>341</sup> The gathering of the hungry in act 2 can be seen as this trial's rehearsal with Chairman (Председатель), who presides over the meeting, and Tsar Hunger functioning as doubles.

summoned to play their roles, the judges can only administer justice when they wear the proper attire. Tsar Hunger's leading lady and accomplice, Death, characteristically female and comically portrayed, is the only one in the courtroom who does not care for Tsar Hunger's instructions. As the jury foreman, she remains at a distance from the judges and gets up only to announce a never-changing verdict: "Condemned, in the name of Satan!"<sup>342</sup> Her *danse macabre* at the end of act 2 is the quintessential symbol of the Middle Ages that prepares the stage for the court proceedings.

Six defendants enter the courtroom wearing muzzles and, one by one, are sentenced to death for their alleged crimes — theft of bread, rape, the murder of a child, theft of an apple, slavery, and the murder of a witch. Since trials may be viewed as liminal events, we can look at Andreev's representation of trial as one that engenders a state of comradeship during which the initiands — the accused in Andreev's play — are stripped of their former statuses. With each new person, Tsar Hunger exacerbates the feeling of culpability by informing everyone of how to interpret his or her "crime." For example, when the accused stands trial for being a slave, Tsar Hunger observes that a strong man like him should be killed because he cannot be trusted. "Strong slaves are dangerous even if they are faithful,"<sup>343</sup> agree the spectators. It does not help that some of the defendants resemble wild animals; the last one among the accused is described as ape-like and an "extremely savage-looking creature" with "long hands reaching to his knees, with enormous, wrinkled, filthy fingers" while his "head and face are covered with ruffled hair."<sup>344</sup> The grotesque appearance of the lower classes, who are only "somewhat human,"

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<sup>342</sup> Andreev, *King Hunger*, 57.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

suggests that society is regressing to its primitive origins instead of continuing the process of evolution. The agreement on a guilty verdict, which is followed by a death sentence, satisfies the dominant, upper classes who rely on an act of violence to get rid of the unwanted social stratum. In this respect, legal rituals appear to regenerate the society's structure through acts of lawful violence. As René Girard argues, violence is sacred and can be integral to the social process.<sup>345</sup> Although a trial is often considered a redressive mechanism that helps to mitigate a conflict and avert schisms, here it fails to bring peace and instead encourages violence in a society where human lives cease to matter.

The jury members initially show some degree of compassion for the accused, but they are quickly overcome by the illusion of having too much power in the courtroom. Quite soon, the jury displays sheer indifference toward those defendants who are without defense, as one juror replies: "Forget it. Isn't it all the same to you?"<sup>346</sup> Their enjoyment in watching the accused being sentenced to death transforms the trial into a satire on contemporary society that depicts a community without mercy for anyone who is different. The trial's participants forget that human lives are at stake as the trial turns into a game. The type of conduct that emerges during the performance process is something that Schechner refers to as *deep play*, which is a risky behavior that calls for complete immersion in a game when the stakes are high.<sup>347</sup> A risky behavior, in this case, is the decision made by the jury and audience to treat the judicial process as a game and forget that real lives are being lost with each death sentence. The verdict to

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<sup>345</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 31.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>347</sup> Schechner borrows the term from Jeremy Bentham, who defined it as gaming for high stakes that defies rational approach in *The Theory of Legislation* (1802), and from Clifford Geertz, who, developed Bentham's terminology on the example of excessive wagering during the Balinese cockfight in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

eradicate the lower classes is rather convenient and somewhat reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's proposal to ease Ireland's economic burden by cannibalizing children. That principal irony of the opening — satisfying Death's hunger by killing off the hungry — is accomplished in this example of a structured and collective ritual of trial. The jury's decision to play along and its failure to question the legitimacy of the proceedings lead to their downfall in the final act when, no longer in a position of power, they also become targets of this ritual process that subverts hierarchies and extends Tsar Hunger's ideological control.

Tsar Hunger marks the end of the trial with a speech that underscores the symbolic nature of the ritual in which the community participated. "In compliance with an ancient custom of a symbolic character, we, the judges, must each drink a glass of this liquid," he says as he invites others to finalize the occasion by consuming wine: "It is not blood, although the color is blood-like. . . . it is only red wine,"<sup>348</sup> he explains. The presence of "a large square-shaped bottle filled with red blood-like wine"<sup>349</sup> in the beginning of the act already hints at the initiatory quality of this ritual process. Along with the banquet, which takes place during the intermission, the wine consumption at the end of the act alludes to the sacrament of the Eucharist (or Holy Communion) for this society. Since the canon of the Eucharist during the Last Supper is to remember the sacrifice of Christ, the ritual performed by the allegorical figure of Tsar Hunger allows one to read it as a perversion of the sacrament. As Rappaport would have it, ritual imparts sacred meaning to the objects, whereas the performer involved in this ritual by participating in a liturgical order, accepts, and indicates to himself and to others that he accepts, whatever is

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 51.

encoded in the canons of the order.<sup>350</sup> From this perspective, the act of participating in the feast and consuming wine alongside Tsar Hunger can be read as the community's pledge to serve their new master. This communal ritual, with a table for an altar, a jury for the congregation, and Tsar Hunger as a serving priest, emerges as a statement on the pre-secular culture of Russian society. Quite ironically, the vestigial traces of religion, which would have attempted to regulate violence, surface during the trial in the figure of the convicted sectarian who claims to have burned a witch at the stake.

Andreev wrote to Stanislavskii that he intended *Tsar Hunger* to be a philosophical work without any direct or indirect political references.<sup>351</sup> Comparisons with the peasant riots, a rigged judicial system, and the authoritarian power of the main character known as "tsar" unavoidably generated political parallels. Even though Andreev was arrested, summoned to court, imprisoned, and briefly exiled during the beginning of his career as a playwright, he did not consider himself a revolutionary. He never belonged to any political party and recognized that his revolutionary spirit was not the kind required by the times.<sup>352</sup> Soviet scholarship treated Andreev as a writer who supported the revolution (along with Gor'kii) prior to 1906 but who became a political reactionary thereafter.<sup>353</sup> This notwithstanding, Lunacharskii's critique regarding the abysmal portrayal of the working class and, particularly, the revolution in *Tsar Hunger* enraged Andreev, who had plans, which never materialized, to write a different work devoted to the topic of revolution. This idealized view of revolution remained a distant and

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<sup>350</sup> Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 283.

<sup>351</sup> Liudmila Ken and Leonid Rogov, *Zhizn' Leonida Andreeva, rasskazannaia im samim i ego sovremennikami* (St. Petersburg: KOSTA, 2010), 197-198.

<sup>352</sup> Anisimov, 29.

<sup>353</sup> Iezuitova, 167-168.

unattainable goal in Andreev's mind. In this play, the playwright distinguishes between a riot and a revolution in "A conversation among scholars" (Разговор ученых), when one scientist corrects another: "Do not defame the revolution. This is a rebellion."<sup>354</sup> Andreev regards revolutions and riots to be as separate from each other as creativity is from blind instincts, high art from primitive art, or an event with great potential from one that is doomed from the beginning.<sup>355</sup> What unites these two notions, however, is the common instinct to challenge old norms, even if that means to temporarily throw a society into judicial chaos, as shown in this play, in the hope that it can someday reawaken.

*Tsar Hunger* illustrates the "essentials" of Andreev's approach to dramaturgy, which, according to Iulia Babicheva, rests on a synthesis of themes that include the tragic and comic, concrete and general, momentary and eternal.<sup>356</sup> Like Blok, who regarded *The Song of Fate* as one of his most accomplished works of that period, so too did Andreev regard *Tsar Hunger* as the play that failed to find its audience. He admitted, in a letter to Gor'kii, the general weaknesses of the play, which, in his opinion, had the whiff of a corpse hidden in a cellar.<sup>357</sup> The playwright was unprepared, however, for the reaction to his work and for the attacks, which included producing "seasonal tragedies" on demand (Chukovskii), being a philistine (Lunacharskii), or a reactionary (Gor'kii). Caustic remarks on *Tsar Hunger* poured in from both sides of the political spectrum, emphasizing analogies between the play and Knut Hamsun's

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<sup>354</sup> Andreev, *King Hunger*, 85.

<sup>355</sup> Iulia Babicheva, *Dramaturgiia L. N. Andreeva epokhi pervoi russkoi revoliutsii* (Vologda: Izdatel'stvo VGPI, 1971), 136; Bugrov, *Leonid Andreev. Proza i dramaturgiia*, 81.

<sup>356</sup> Iulia Babicheva, *Evoliutsiia zhanrov russkoi dramy XIX-nachala XX veka* (Vologda: Izdatel'stvo VGPI, 1982), 75.

<sup>357</sup> Anisimov, 302.

novel *Hunger* [Sult] (1890) and culminating in a parody (глупо-драма).<sup>358</sup> That year, Merezhkovskii launched an attack on what he regarded as the young playwright's underserved popularity, comparing Andreev to an infant being caressed to death by a loving monkey (Andreev's readers) and stating that the absence of hope in Andreev's works was the reason why Andreev could not write tragedies.<sup>359</sup> Blok, nonetheless, remained one of Andreev's loyal supporters, praising the playwright for capturing the spirit of troubled times, and sensed (as he did with Remizov) their special kinship.<sup>360</sup>

To be sure, Andreev grappled with existential questions at the peak of his popularity and searched for his version of a new drama. “[Leonid Andreev], who frightens the reader with the dark abysses of unsolvable questions and ruthlessly makes fun of them and his own fears,” writes Babicheva about the disparate qualities present in a playwright, “creates complex artistic designs and immediately parodies them with his wit.”<sup>361</sup> Contemporary critics assessed Andreev's marginal status as not quite a symbolist and conveniently labeled him an “expressionist.” They recognized the play's author in the figure of Girl in Black (Девушка в черном) in *Tsar Hunger*, who represents a social group that is as foreign to the world of the bourgeoisie as it is to the world of the workers.<sup>362</sup> Although the play was published the year it was written (with the trial scene even appearing in *The Buzzer* [Gudok], the Bolshevik newspaper in Baku), the imperial censors forbade its stage production. The work, which fit in with the avant-garde aesthetic of the

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<sup>358</sup> Victor Burenin's *Tsar Bedlam* (1908).

<sup>359</sup> Dmitri Merezhkovskii, “V obez'iannikh lapakh (o Leonide Andreeve)” in *V tikhom omute. Stat'i i issledovaniia raznykh let* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), 17.

<sup>360</sup> Blok, vol. 8 of *Polnoe sobranie*, 22.

<sup>361</sup> Babicheva, *Evoliutsiia zhanrov russkoi dramy*, 73.

<sup>362</sup> Vladimir Friche, *Leonid Andreev. (Opyt kharakteristiki)* (Moscow: Tipografiia F.Ia. Burche, 1909), 52.

1920s, also had little luck passing Soviet censorship: several years after Andreev's death, a relatively unknown Sergei Eisenstein was hired as the artist for the expansive production. Despite Eisenstein spending two months working on costumes and envisioning the play's "colossal triumph," its production was again canceled for ideological reasons related to the ongoing famine.<sup>363</sup>

Andreev's play depicts the plight of a collective that is manipulated by metaphysical forces and results in the annihilation of people who are busy forging their own chains. The trial scene, in particular, is staged to underscore the country's state of crisis, which is suggested by the medieval characters' delight in watching the society's gradual disintegration. The idea that one can overcome sacrificial violence via the judicial system fails to present a viable alternative. At the end of the play, when Tsar Hunger stands to overlook a field of rising corpses against a red and black dawn, he uses the opportunity to grandiloquently lament human deaths: "Life itself blesses us," he declares. "Great sacred truth will protect us with her veil, and the ultimate judgment of history will not be more just than our own."<sup>364</sup> The trial becomes a prescient commentary on the social process, including the agrarian riots that inspired it, the show trials — like that of Mendel Beilis — that were to take place several years later, and, of course, the Revolution and civil war. When Tsar Hunger speaks about the earth being hungry and dreaming of revolt, the figure of Time notes the intimation of an ongoing riot that is already raging within: "At night, when the world is wrapped in silence, faint moans do arise to me from below," he utters. "I seem to hear the groans of the whole earth, and they do not let me rest."<sup>365</sup> The play's

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<sup>363</sup> See Vladimir Zabrodin's "Popytka teatra." [*S. M. Eisenstein: pro et contra* (2015)] and Natal'ia Skorokhod's "Ot Tsaria Goloda k Stachke. Vliianie p'esy Andreeva na fil'm Eisensteina." [*Voprosy teatra* (1-2, 2017)] for the influence of *Tsar Hunger* on Eisenstein's *Strike* [Stachka] (1924).

<sup>364</sup> Andreev, *King Hunger*, 76.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

final scene of urban apocalypse scraps the notion that a riot is a one-time occurrence and, as is the case in Blok's mythical battle, imbues the event with the universal quality of an eternal, ongoing insurrection.

### 5. *Conclusions*

These three plays share characteristics that reflect the search for new concepts in theater and dramaturgy during the time of political reaction. All three depict Russia. All three integrate the plot within a framework of mystery or morality play. All three rely on a ritual of passage that brings unexpected results: the Ascetic dies, the traveler loses his way, and humanity flees from the rising dead. All of these elements turn these works into effective commentaries on Russian reality and enable the genre to transcend that feared *kozlovak*. If the Ancient Theater was an attempt to imitate European medievalism, these playwrights and others like them latched onto the European tradition in order to graft their notion of a liturgical drama that was at best marginal in Russian Orthodoxy. They produced works that tested the limits of form, de-privileged character development, and introduced narratives that reflected upon the function and nature of theater. The anachronistic features found in these plays — demons sneaking around in business suits, a contemporary traveler stumbling upon a medieval battle, or the allegorical figures presiding over a trial — repeatedly shatter the medieval illusion.

The performances of these rituals challenge the status quo and evoke changes in the status of the character or the collective. These rituals of passage begin in a traditional way but soon take unforeseen turns and end up as interrupted (Remizov), inverted (Blok), or distorted (Andreev), much like the rites found in Renaissance plays.<sup>366</sup> Framed within the genre of

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<sup>366</sup> See *True Rites and Maimed Rites. Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age* (1992), the collection of essays, edited by Linda Woodbridge and Berry Edwards.

mystery or morality plays, they parody the sacraments, as is the case with the Ascetic's prayer in this early version of the Holy Orders, Hermann's spiritual Baptism through participation in a mythical battle, and Tsar Hunger's invitation to the Eucharist-like meal. These rituals are also agonistic in nature and produce an apocalyptic vision of the world that is nothing like the medieval utopia that inspired it. Lastly, all three rituals enact theaters that unite actor and audience in theater, battle, and trial via external, metaphysical forces. The nefarious characters in charge — Remizov's Germanic demons, Blok's mysterious Faina, and Andreev's allegorical tsar — seem to exist "betwixt and between" worlds, and they are not of Russian folkloric origins.

Although three writers shared only some aspects of the symbolist aesthetic and largely pursued their own, very distinct paths in literature, they offer similar visions of a country in crisis. Blok, who blamed the stifling effect of political reaction on Russian culture, presents his vision of revolution as an ongoing event, albeit not in the same category as the "eternal revolution" that was promoted by the flashy political slogans of the anarchists.<sup>367</sup> He understood revolution as a revolt that drew meaning and significance from the turning points of national history. Remizov's *deistvo* and Andreev's trial promote similar concepts of insurrection as an event that had been set in motion long time ago. Their reliance on metaphysical characters of un-Russian origins to trigger it allows society to release its own self-destructiveness through acts of sacrifice and presents revolution as an inorganic event in the country's historical development.

Shortly after Andreev's death in 1919, Blok wrote about their shared feeling of inner chaos.<sup>368</sup> Blok then identified the innocent and child-like question ("Why?") that took on a deeper meaning in Andreev's works: in Blok's view, Russia-the-child was asking this question

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<sup>367</sup> Blok, vol. 7 of *Polnoe sobranie*, 111.

<sup>368</sup> Blok, vol. 6 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 131.

of civilization but was not receiving an answer. Many years after Blok's death in 1921, Remizov (who would die in emigration in 1957) composed a posthumous letter to Blok in which he imagined their acquaintance as taking place along the impassable roads of history: "We met somewhere once, and maybe even more than once — at which crossing? — you were in a knight's armor, with a cross in hand, and I had on my sharp-coned fox hat, all under the howling and beating of a tambourine."<sup>369</sup> Their voices, Remizov continues, sounded in unison through the howling of the whirlwind that engulfed their country. This eschatological vision of history, with questions for which there are no answers, combined with the motif of eternal Maeterlinckian waiting, unite these playwrights in their approaches to art. The genre of mystery play, with its play-within-a-play structure, ensures the existence of irony as the conditional nature of theater becomes exposed. However, it is Schlegel's notion of irony as "the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos"<sup>370</sup> that surfaces not only in the negativity of the revolt but that fact that this society is waiting for something that is already in progress.

Homologous with the rituals of passage in these dramas are ceremonies that were performed at the court of the last tsar: both share the same structure with ritual that marks ruptures in a community's social structure. The court performances did not directly lead to the political troubles, but they failed to support the belief of the tsar's *corona invisibilis*. Both aesthetic efforts — ritualized behaviors in the court culture and dramas — lack the important component of visualization. In his *Letters about Theater* [Pis'ma o teatre] (1912-1913), Andreev recognized this, "a living photograph," as the clear advantage of the emerging medium of silent film, which he labeled "a rich and vulgar American uncle." If the court enacted medieval rituals

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<sup>369</sup> Remizov, "Iz ognennoi Rossii," vol. 10, 328.

<sup>370</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas in Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1971), 247.

in a spirit of a living museum piece until wars and the revolution put an end to these restorations, film offered a chance to preserve these performances for posterity. Since complicated plots were not feasible to show during a short period of screen time, this meant that those theatrical conventions, developed for stage productions, were no longer applicable. The early filmmakers thus had to develop new cinematographic conventions and establish a new ontological space.

### Chapter 3: Costume Dramas and the Tsar's Chronicles

#### 1. *Sten'ka Razin, the First Russian "Acted" Film*

“I loved cinema the way it was for a long time,” wrote Aleksandr Blok in a letter to a film director Aleksandr Sanin on September 10, 1918, “and then I grew colder toward it as it was being taken over by plots with philistinism and the vulgarity of ‘high society’.”<sup>371</sup> Blok’s words allude to the charm and naiveté of early cinema as its most pertinent characteristic, which he considered irrevocably lost. Although he is vague about the kind of silent cinema that appealed to him during its early days, whether it was a Russian or foreign-made, newsreels or documentary genre, adventure or historical films, the quality that enchanted the poet was certainly present in the first Russian-made “acted” films. To be sure, this kind of “ingenuous charm and touching diligence”<sup>372</sup> was in the very first Russian motion picture as it ambitiously reached for tragedy, adventure, and romance, all during its six minutes of screen time. The film was *Sten'ka Razin, Life of Brigands from the Lower Reaches* [Sten'ka Razin (Ponizovaia vol'nitsa)] (1908), directed by Vladimir Romashkov but associated with the name of its producer, Aleksandr Drankov. A self-proclaimed court photographer, opportunist, and entrepreneur, Drankov explained his new, bold investment: “I produce motion pictures that are important for their historical narration and truth. All the bygone colorful life of the brigands from the lower reaches [...] passes before the viewer’s eyes, transporting him to another century, another environment.”<sup>373</sup>

The release of *Sten'ka Razin* became a cultural sensation in the Russian Empire, and the

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<sup>371</sup> Blok, vol. 8 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 238.

<sup>372</sup> Neia Zorkaia, *Istoriia otechestvennogo kino. XX vek* (Moscow: Belyi gorod, 2014), 35.

<sup>373</sup> Boris Likhachev, *Kino v Rossii (1896-1926): materialy k istorii russkogo kino*, vol. 1 (Leningrad: Academia, 1927), 51.

date of its premiere, October 15 (28), 1908, at the Aquarium Theater in St. Petersburg — where the first screening of the film by the Lumière brothers took place twelve years earlier — has since been considered the birthday of Russian cinema.



Figure 22: The poster of *Sten'ka Razin*.

The Soviet filmmaker Nikolai Anoshchenko recalled the special experience of watching the 224 meters of the motion picture that left many spellbound: “The [film’s] success was enormous [and] its impact on the audience, which was greatly enhanced by singing of a large choir, stayed with me for the rest of my life.”<sup>374</sup> Drankov delivered a picture that satisfied the demands of a Russian public that had grown tired of foreign productions and wanted to see a familiar story from Russian history. This achievement fully exploited the new artistic medium that offered the audiences something that its rival, theater, could not: namely, the type of experience that

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<sup>374</sup> Yuri Tsivian, *Velikii kinemo. Katalog sokhranivshikhsia igrovykh fil'mov Rossii 1908-1919* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002), 24.

effortlessly bridged the gap between viewers and performers by eliminating any social barriers (at least during the time of its screening). “Look at the [movie theater’s] auditorium. You will be amazed at the nature of the public,” wrote Aleksandr Serafimovich about cinema’s power of inclusion. “Everyone has gathered here — students and gendarmes, writers and prostitutes, intellectuals — in glasses and beards, workers, clerks, merchants, women from the high society, fashionistas, officials — all in all, everybody.”<sup>375</sup> Other intellectuals credited cinema with the ability to heal, like Andrei Belyi, who referred to a movie theater as the place where a person came when his or her soul was covered in bruises.<sup>376</sup> Above all, it seems cinema offered people a much-needed escape from the turmoil of the present.

According to Boris Likhachev, 1912 was the year that ended the booming trend of costume dramas. Out of 297 films that were produced from 1908-1912, 85 were “acted” films which were classified as follows: 20% - *belles lettres*; 27.1% - plays; 5.9% - songs; 12.9% - melodramas; 8.2% - comedies; 25.9% - historical dramas.<sup>377</sup> The last category, of historical dramas (granted that not all of them were about Russia’s medieval times), combined with “plays” set during the Middle Ages and scripts based on folk songs, represents approximately one third of the total material produced during those first four years. The release of the first Russian motion picture could not be better timed, since by the spring of 1908 the market was flooded with foreign films. As the times of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (yet again) emerged before these early twentieth-century viewers, the public grew excited to relive the troubled and well-known love affair of the vagabond Cossack. After the film’s astounding success, the first

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<sup>375</sup> Semen Ginzburg, *Kinematografiia dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), 105.

<sup>376</sup> Belyi, *Arabeski*, 350.

<sup>377</sup> Boris Likhachev, 96.

screenwriters would base their scripts on such sources as literary works, historical and folk narratives, which often included contradictory historical figures. Since film was viewed as a way of capturing reality, which theater could not do, this fascination with the past gradually evolved into an attempt to recreate the medieval period. Film also offered identification with the actor onscreen, thereby ostensibly presenting proof of its “anti-theatricality,” and enforcing the belief that this was not an actor playing a role but a real individual.<sup>378</sup> These achievements notwithstanding, film continued to look to the stage for direction instead of developing its own techniques and, as Jay Leyda recaps, “plodded drearily past the art movements of [its] day without absorbing more than their unhealthy attitudes and subjects.”<sup>379</sup>

## 2. *Foreign Influences*

In the same way that a “mystery play” in the works of Russian symbolists attempts to combine two entirely different concepts of “modern” and “medieval” (see chapter 2), so does a contradictory notion of “medieval cinema”.<sup>380</sup> French director Georges Méliès’ 1899 adaptation of the story of *Joan of Arc* [Jeanne d’Arc] is generally considered to be the first notable<sup>381</sup> example of film set in the Middle Ages. Méliès explained that his fascination with the narrative had little to do with Saint Joan herself: he claimed to have been attracted by the story’s spectacle, particularly the appearance of angels, the immolation, and the sending of Joan’s soul to

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<sup>378</sup> Yuri Lotman and Yuri Tsivian, *Dialog s ekranom* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1994), 11.

<sup>379</sup> Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1960), 59.

<sup>380</sup> On the paradox of the terminology, consult “Introduction” in *Race, Class, and Gender in ‘Medieval’ Cinema* (2007), the collection of essays edited by Tison Pugh and Lynn T. Ramey.

<sup>381</sup> Kevin J. Harty’s catalog lists Méliès’ film about Joan of Arc in 1897 and the film by George Habot in 1898 as the first examples of medievalism in film.

Heaven.<sup>382</sup> It would seem, then, that the list of intrigues (or special effects) that appealed to this pioneer filmmaker were the miracles that are associated with the genre of mystery plays and their variations. But instead of choosing a story from the Bible, Méliès settled on filming the life of a legendary historical figure from French national lore. In Great Britain and the United States, the historical genre of the “toga play”, which focused on the stories from the early years of Christianity and the Roman Empire, also gained popularity during this time in theater and film. Film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, such as *King John* (1899), were popular in Great Britain, whereas Thomas Edison’s *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (1895) and *Parsifal* (1904) were among the first attempts at filming the Middle Ages by American film companies. Germany appears to be the only nation that did not share the same fascination with the historical epics, which was going to change couple decades later with the cinema of the Weimar Republic and its boom in the period dramas during the 1920s.

In addition to French epics, the role of trailblazers in the industry of medieval-themed productions belongs to Italian costume dramas which perfected this cinematic trend. Filmed on historical sites and among ancient ruins of Italy, these period films quickly catapulted the historical epic to the status of one of the most important of cinematic genres. Aleksandr Khanzhonkov, who happened to be Drankov’s main rival in the industry and who was in charge of renting out the foreign films to movie theaters at that time, immediately recognized the appeal of these period pictures, which were produced on elaborate sets and involved large crowd scenes.<sup>383</sup> The historical costume epics were among the most commercially successful films,

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<sup>382</sup> Robin Blaetz, *Joan of Arc and the Cinema in Joan of Arc, a Saint for All Reasons: Studies in Myth and Politics*, ed. Dominique Goy-Blanquet (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 146.

<sup>383</sup> Peter Bondanella and Federico Pacchioni, *A History of Italian Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 8.

most set in classical times but some situated in other memorable periods of Italian history, such as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance.<sup>384</sup> These “memorable” depictions of Italian cinema spanned a period from ancient times to the nineteenth century and tended to focus on events that startled the world.<sup>385</sup> Dante Alighieri quickly became the most popular historical persona of the Late Middle Ages, as films based on his life, the *Divine Comedy*, and figures inspired by him appeared in Italy, the most important of which was *L’Inferno* (1911).<sup>386</sup>

If Joan of Arc and Dante were the most popular of European medieval personalities — Joan’s story was adapted for the screen at least eight<sup>387</sup> times between 1898 and 1914, and versions of Dante’s life and works were filmed in Italy eleven<sup>388</sup> times between 1908 and 1911 — the honor of the most popular Russian medieval figure belongs to Ivan the Terrible. The murderous ruler appeared on the screens at least six and as many as eleven<sup>389</sup> times from 1908 to 1914, thereby securing his popularity in film long before Fedor Shaliapin’s screen debut in 1915 or Eisenstein’s highly-acclaimed productions of 1940s. These are the six<sup>390</sup> films with the cast of characters that include Grozny:

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> The first Italian historical film was *The Taking of Rome* [La Presa di Roma] (1905), which focused on the events of the Italian unification in 1870. The list of successful historical epics included *Quo Vadis* (1913), *The Last Days of Pompeii* [Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei] (1913), *Julius Caesar* [Caio Giulio Cesar] (1914), and many others.

<sup>386</sup> Bondanella and Pacchioni, 6. Original italics.

<sup>387</sup> Blaetz, 145.

<sup>388</sup> Bondanella and Pacchioni, 6.

<sup>389</sup> Vishnevskii’s catalog lists additional 5 films, which had to include Ivan the Terrible as one of the main characters. Since only limited information — sometimes just a title — is available on these films, it is difficult to make any definitive conclusions about the cast of the actors involved with these productions. These films are *Prince Serebrianyi* [Kniaz’ Serebrianyi] (1907), *Merchant Kalashnikov* [Kupets Kalashnikov (Boi kuptsa Kalashnikova)] (1909), *Maliuta Skuratov* (1911); *The Tsar’s Bride* [Tsarskaia nevesta (1911)], and *Maliuta Skuratov* [Maliuta Skuratov (Zhertva oprichniny)] (1914).

<sup>390</sup> Vishnevskii’s catalog lists *Choice of the Tsar’s Bride\** [Vybor tsarskoi nevesty] (1908) with the note that the script was based on Lev Mei’s *The Maid of Pskov* [Pskovitiianka] (1859). If this is indeed true, the film would have

1. *Song about Merchant Kalashnikov*\*<sup>391</sup> [Pesn' pro kuptsa Kalashnikova] (1908)
2. *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* [Smert' Ioanna Groznogo] (1909)
3. *Volga and Siberia or Ermak Timofeevich the Conqueror of Siberia*\* [Volga i Sibir' (Ermak Timofeevich — pokoritel' Sibiri)] (1909)
4. *Vasilisa Melent'eva and Ivan the Terrible* [Vasilisa Melent'eva i Tsar' Ivan Vasil'evich Groznyi] (1911)
5. *Prince Serebrianyi* [Kniaz' Serebrianyi] (1911)
6. *Wrath of the Tsar* [Tsarskii gnev] (1912)

Filmmakers went into great lengths to make the tsar appear believable. Such was the case with the make-up of Ivan the Terrible in *Song about Merchant Kalashnikov*\*, which was copied from Mark Antokol'skii's famous sculpture to achieve maximum resemblance. All eyes were on the actor who played Ivan the Terrible in *Ermak*\* tasking the Cossack with expanding the Russian land and taking the Siberian lands away from the Tatars. These scenes included Groznyi leading the procession toward the Cathedral of the Annunciation, his departure for the Chudov Monastery, and his acceptance of gifts from the people of Siberia.<sup>392</sup> From Groznyi presiding over the feast in *Song about Merchant Kalashnikov* to angrily shaking his staff in *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* to ordering an execution of the disobedient boyar in *Wrath of the Tsar* to

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relied on Mei's text that was the inspiration for Nikolai Rimskii-Korsakov's opera *The Tsar's Bride* that featured Ivan the Terrible. Since Khanzhonkov does not reference Mei's text in his memoirs and describes this film's scenes, which clearly allude to the painting of a tsar choosing a bride, I am inclined to consider Vishnevskii's reference to Mei's work as an error.

<sup>391</sup> Hereafter, an asterisk (\*) marks films that have been presumed lost. All film dates are taken from Veniamin Vishnevskii's film catalog that is considered to be the first comprehensive collection of Russian pre-revolutionary cinema but not without occasional errors (as noted above). Many of these early films, like the texts written during the medieval times, have a second title which I usually omit. Among common second titles are *Scenes from the Medieval Times in Russia* [Stseny iz drevenerusskoi zhizni] or *A Drama from Old Russian Life* [Drama iz starinnoi russkoi zhizni]. I refer to Dmitrii Likhachev's assessment regarding the meaning of these second titles when analyzing Aleksei Remizov's *Comedy of the Devils* in chapter 2.

<sup>392</sup> "Sinematograph v Kremle," *Utro Rossii*, July 24 (August 6), 1911.

instructing Maliuta Skuratov on how to murder his unfaithful spouse in *Vasilisa Melent'eva* and *Ivan the Terrible*, times rife with massacres, lawlessness, wars, and power struggle painted a historical portrait or a ruler who was known neither for his noble self-sacrifice, as it was the case with Joan of Arc, nor for his artistry, as it was the case with Dante.

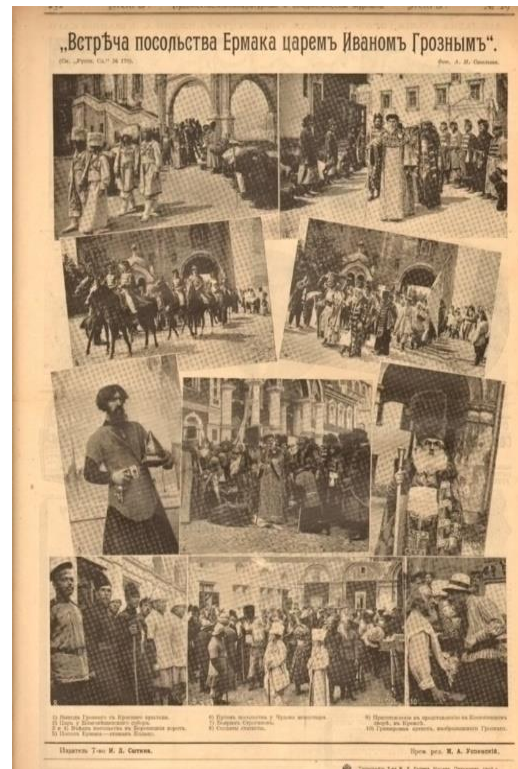


Figure 23: The newspaper’s photographs from the filming of *Ermak* in the Kremlin.

Despite these efforts in trying to present the tsars as authentically as possible, critics scrutinized these portrayals for excessive theatricality. Such was the case, for example, with the actor playing Grozny in *The Death of Ivan the Terrible*, who was harshly criticized for being too overweight to be believable. The issue of excessive gesticulating was by far a more serious one than any of those that had to do with physical appearance. “The actor in the historical play abuses the power of gesture,” was how one film critic expressed his dissatisfaction with the actor who played Ivan III in *Marfa-Posadnitsa* (1910), a costume drama depicting the conquest of Novgorod. “The gestures [of the actor who plays the nobleman] on the screen do not resemble

the gestures of an ordinary man.”<sup>393</sup> From this standpoint, it can be argued, in these films the tsar’s body unintentionally became something that Bakhtin would later refer to as a “source of the grotesque” as exemplified by comic performers of the marketplace during the Middle Ages.<sup>394</sup> The actor’s inability to grasp the difference between acting on the stage and in front of the camera in these films emphasized the *carnavalesque* aspect of the performed court rituals on screen, while the ritual *carnivalized* the oppressive social structure of the Middle Ages instead of reinforcing its ideology.

The fascination of Russian filmmakers with the medieval period developed into an aesthetic that was imitated rather than invented. Denise Youngblood, for example, writes that in most important respects, Russian cinema followed European patterns with only the most minor variations.<sup>395</sup> Although the Russian Empire’s fascination with filming the Middle Ages was not an exception since it imitated a popular cultural trend of the day, it had different resonance in Russia because of the political conditions. The desire to film stories from national history encouraged a shift toward native film productions at a time when American and, especially, French film companies, such as the Pathé Brothers (Pathé Frères) and Gaumont, monopolized the Russian film industry. Like the French and Italians, the Russians, too, preferred topics that focused on the nation’s critical events, as well as simpler stories about life in Russian villages with their customs, habits, and rituals. The essential characteristics of early Russian cinema, all of which are incidentally present in *Sten’ka Razin*, include “emphasis on a historical figure (or literary text), a penchant for shooting on location, static camera, liberal use of the extreme long

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<sup>393</sup> Tsivian, *Velikii kinemo*, 64.

<sup>394</sup> Bakhtin, 352-353.

<sup>395</sup> Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, xii.

shot, and long-takes.”<sup>396</sup> Petr Chardynin, the actor and filmmaker, later remembered that the public’s interest in pictures about Russian history was so overwhelming during those years that orders rained down on the film studios like from a horn of plenty.<sup>397</sup> These pictures capitalized on the fascination with national history and offered a new perspective on the medieval period through the lens of a rapidly developing visual medium that was still *terra incognita*.

### 3. *Tableaux Vivants: from the Parlor to the Screen*

Early silent films are often described as a succession of *tableaux vivants* separated by intertitles. Translated from French as “living picture,” *tableau vivant* is defined as “a silent and motionless person or group of people posed and attired to represent a well-known character, event, or work of art.”<sup>398</sup> Historically, *tableaux vivants* depicted works of art and could be traced back to the performances of mystery play cycles on the church squares of medieval Europe. It was Denis Diderot and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, theoreticians of the Enlightenment, who first formulated the functions of *tableaux vivants*. For example, in his writings on French theater, Diderot emphasizes the importance of the *tableau vivant* as a compositional method in stage performance. “An unforeseen incident that occurs in the action and that suddenly changes the state of the characters is a dramatic plot twist,” he writes. “A disposition of these characters on the stage so natural and true that, if faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on the canvas, is a tableau.”<sup>399</sup> Lessing’s *Laocoon* [Laocoön] (1766) interprets *tableau* as a “pregnant

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<sup>396</sup> Denise J. Youngblood, *Sten’ka Razin* in *Directory of World Cinema: Russia*, vol. 4, ed. Birgit Beumers (Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2011), 57.

<sup>397</sup> Tsivian, *Velikii kinemo* 19.

<sup>398</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Tableau vivant.”

<sup>399</sup> “Un incident imprévu qui se passe en action, et qui change subitement l’état des personnages, est un coup de théâtre. Une disposition des personnages sur la scène, si naturelle et vraie, que rendue fidèlement par un peintre, elle me plairait sur la toile, est un tableau.” [Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres*, vol. 6 (Paris: Chez A. Belin, 1819), 364.]

moment,” that is, a moment carefully selected by the artist that acquires meaning through its representation of permanent durability.<sup>400</sup> Since the attraction of *tableaux vivants* originates from the tension between stasis and motion captured in a single moment, the adaptation of this form of still-life as a basic unit of film during the *fin de siècle* developed from the mutual dependence of *tableau* and film on movement. A *tableau* may remain frozen as the image of a particular moment, the idea of movement is encoded into its structure.

The writings of these two eighteenth-century philosophers certainly drew attention to *tableaux vivants*, but the real craze for this art form developed during the nineteenth century. After becoming increasingly popular in the domestic setting as a type of parlor game for the upper classes who enjoyed recreating famous paintings using this form of still-life, the fascination with *tableaux* soon reached the imperial courts of Europe. Many accounts of the *tableaux* performed at the Russian court survive in the enthusiastic memoirs of visiting foreigners who had an appreciation for the genre. For example, Thomas Witlam Atkinson was captivated by the *tableaux vivants* performed for emperor Nikolai I. “Some of these were highly interesting, as they were representations of life seven centuries back,” writes Atkinson. “Old furniture, armor, and plate, were brought from the Kremlin; these and the antique dresses gave a most faithful character to the pictures.”<sup>401</sup> Atkinson’s narrative dates the representation of the scene as seven centuries ago, which makes it approximately eleventh century. The traveler then describes the performance that appears to be a variation on the genre of morality play. “During the evening a *tableau* was given representing the four elements, Air, Earth, Fire, and Water,

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<sup>400</sup> G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon; or the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, trans. William Ross (London: J. Ridgway & Sons, 1836), 29-30.

<sup>401</sup> Thomas Witlam Atkinson, *Oriental and Western Siberia: a Narrative of Seven Years' Explorations and Adventures in Siberia, Mongolia, the Kirghis Steppes, Chinese Tartary, and Part of Central Asia* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1858), 2.

which were personified by four beautiful young ladies [...]. Without dropping the curtain, this picture was changed by suddenly drawing off the dresses; which was done by someone beneath the stage.”<sup>402</sup> The popularity of the *tableaux vivants* as a form of private theater by the end of the nineteenth century promoted ways of conveying emotions non-verbally.

Diderot’s writings articulate the sociopolitical functions of *tableaux vivants*, which became increasingly popular in the *tableaux* presented before the European monarchs. Like the characters of Air, Earth, Fire, and Water from Atkinson’s Russian theater encounter, characters representing countries or nations frequently appeared in historically-themed *tableaux vivants*. In Great Britain, for instance, where *tableaux vivants* were especially popular, these characters often emphasized the country’s patronage over its colonies. *The Statesman and Friend of India* from January 9, 1877, reports on one such performance in honor of Queen Victoria’s assumption of the imperial title. “It consisted of a series of *tableaux vivants* of the eastern subjects of Her Majesty, the various nations appearing in their own costumes, and offering a tribute of their respective country-products to the British Crown,” writes the reporter. “The *finale* was very grand. Britannia with the traditional scepter and the British Lion was discovered and received the homage of the representatives of Her Majesty’s eastern dependencies who appeared before her in a group.”<sup>403</sup> Similarly, the Austro-Hungarian Empire employed *tableaux vivants* during its 1898 jubilee celebrations presenting the multi-ethnic state as one harmonious nation. *The Emperor’s Dream*, a play written specifically for the occasion, was performed before Franz Josef I in a series of *tableaux vivants*. It told the story of King Rudolf (1218-1291), the first emperor of the Hapsburg Empire, and his concern for the future of his lands. Rudolf falls asleep and, in his

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 2-3. Original italics.

<sup>403</sup> “Additional Supplement to the Public Opinion,” in *Public Opinion and Official Communication about the Bengal Music School and its President* (Calcutta: Panchanun Mookerjee, 1877): 24. Original italics.

dream, meets the characters Loyalty, Love, and Future, with the latter becoming the emperor's guide through the country's future history. This history is presented as a series of "dream images," which begin with the First Congress of Vienna in 1515 and end with the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815, while each important historical moment in-between is explained to the audience. The final *tableau* of the play celebrates a monarchy that rules over the allegedly peaceful union of co-existing nations:

As Rudolf sinks back into sleep, the play culminates in the magnificent apotheosis. This final scene blends together decorations and 'allegorical figures of the present,' such as *Bohemia, Hungaria, and Galicia* wearing provincial colors and bearing the shields of the Habsburg provinces. This vision of the Monarchy as a harmonious mosaic of peoples and cultures moving into the future with confidence, guided by the experience of the sacred House of Hapsburg, reaches a crescendo with the collective singing of the state hymn.<sup>404</sup>

The political message of these British and Austro-Hungarian *tableaux* lies in presenting these empires not through the lens of "colonizer versus the colonized" but as one nation. Such performances, aimed at promoting monarchical agendas, extended beyond the imperial courts, and they were frequently presented during the celebrations of various holidays and festivals.



Figure 24: Two women portray Austria and Prussia in this *tableau vivant* from the festival in Ravensburg (ca. 1900).

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<sup>404</sup> Daniel L. Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Hapsburg Austria, 1848-1916*. (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005). 87. Original italics.

In the Russian Empire, performances of *tableaux* took place only among the nobility, and instead of emphasizing the country as a multi-ethnic state, their purpose was to sing dithyrambs to the empire and the emperor. For example, there were plans to commemorate Aleksandr II's twenty-five years on the throne in 1880 with a production that featured Aleksandr Borodin's musical *tableau*, *The Steppes of Central Asia*. The production never materialized, but its focus would have been on Russia's politics in the Orient. "The celebration's grandiose plans featured a conversation between 'the Genius of Russia' and 'History,' to be illustrated by various orchestral tableaux vivants highlighting the monarch's achievements," writes David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye. "In addition to Borodin's contribution, other pieces included 'Slava' (Glory), a chorus by Nikolai [Rimskii-Korsakov], and a march by Modest [Mussorgskii] commemorating the capture of the Ottoman stronghold of Kars in 1877."<sup>405</sup> Russian writer and journalist Ol'ga Novikova describes in her memoirs the seven *tableaux* presentation of "The Glory of Russia," which drew on similar themes of the victorious nation, and were performed for Aleksandr III in 1888. "The last picture, 'Parnassus,' was most effectively and cleverly arranged on one of the galleries over the staircase, facing the entrance," Novikova writes. "During this latter piece a part of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven was executed."<sup>406</sup> Although the narrative of "The Glory of Russia" is not provided, it is safe to suggest, given its title and the reference to Mount Parnassus, that this was most likely a panegyric production that promoted monarchical ideologies via popular Greek *tableaux*.

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<sup>405</sup> David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Aleksandr Borodin," in *Russia's People of Empire: Life Stories from Eurasia, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Stephen M. Norris and Willard Sunderland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 179.

<sup>406</sup> Olga Novikoff, *The M.P. for Russia: Reminiscences and Correspondence of Madame Olga Novikoff*, vol. 2, ed. W.T. Steed (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), 254.

When the time of acted films arrived, Méliès' expansive and highly ambitious production of *Joan of Arc* became the first demonstration of the successful adaptation of *tableaux vivants* for the screen. The film consisted of twelve *tableaux* and featured hundreds of actors parading before the camera in extravagant historical costumes. "After the turn of the century, [early film] also appropriated the aesthetics of *tableaux vivants* in its attempts to develop new models of narrative cinema," writes Steven Jacobs. "Borrowed from the stage melodrama, *tableaux* enabled early filmmakers to punctuate the action, to emphasize or prolong a dramatic situation, or to give a scene an abstract or quasi-allegorical significance."<sup>407</sup> Filmmakers looked at *tableaux vivants* as a device that helped transfer history on screen and easily present it to an audience that was usually, but not always, familiar with the plot. *Tableaux vivants* turn into very primitive plots as they enter the movies and almost always present recreations of historical moments. Such aspects of these films as framing, for example, still mimics theatrical productions of the era. In *Sten'ka Razin*, for example, the main characters, Razin and the princess, remain on the sides of the frame as if this was a theater stage.<sup>408</sup> As the years progressed, however, the main characters moved to the center of the frame and the film narration became more consistent. The reimagining of history through these cinematic *tableaux* added a new dimension to early films and took advantage of the exoticism of the period that they presented.

#### 4. Documenting "History"

The production of documentary films in the Russian Empire officially began in 1907 with a list of 38 films, therefore preceding the production of the "acted" films by one year.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 92.

<sup>408</sup> Lotman and Tsivian, 199-200.

<sup>409</sup> Veniamin Vishnevskii, *Dokumental'nye fil'my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii: 1907-1916* (Moscow: Muzei kino, 1996), 14-18.

According to Boris Likhachev, 212 out of 297 films produced from 1908 to 1912 were documentaries, which illustrates how popular and accessible this genre was to early filmmakers. These documentaries can be broadly divided into two types: *picturesque* (видовые) and *chronicles* (хроники). The picturesque documentaries focused on places and local events that were of interest to the public, while the chronicles literally chronicled different activities, including the outings and public functions of the imperial family, which would become known as “tsar’s chronicles”. Although both types are generally characterized as belonging to the documentary genre, referring to these films as documentaries is inaccurate since many of them were purposefully staged to impress audiences or served as political propaganda. Rumors continuously circulated about certain political events being filmed and distributed abroad where they would show the real nature of the state of things in the Russian Empire. For example, Felix Mesguich, who was the only foreign cameraman present in the country during the events of the Bloody Sunday, claimed to have filmed the uprising, but the film never surfaced, and no evidence was ever found that it even existed.<sup>410</sup> Leyda describes the 1904-1906 period as “a period of the first swift sweep of the film’s popularity in pre-war Russia.”<sup>411</sup> With the revolutionary upheavals of 1905-1907 still on everybody’s mind, filmmakers had to be careful about how they portrayed the country to the public. Although the censors, ever vigilant about the

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<sup>410</sup> This is how Felix Mesguich remembered the events of the Bloody Sunday: “On January 22nd, about noon, a crowd swept along the Morskaya right under the windows of the Hotel de France. My camera was hidden behind a window on the first floor. Through the black curtain it could see without being seen. Suddenly the tide of demonstrators (I was told they were close to a hundred thousand) flowed into the Prospekt moving towards the Triumphal Arch, preceded by icons and religious banners. They were headed towards the square in front of the Winter Palace where strong detachments of Cossacks and artillery had been posted. A bugle sounded. A squadron of cavalry, swords unsheathed, rode down on the crowd. I heard a terrible fusillade, then the screams of the crowd, trapped by the soldiers and trying to escape. It was a frightful debacle. I heard the horses’ hooves on the cobbles. Blood reddened the snow. Night fell; the strike of the electric workers threw the city into darkness; campfires were lit at the street corners. The wounded were removed in stretchers — hundreds had been killed.” (Leyda, 26).

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 25.

content of new releases, dictated rules for these early films, people flocked to theater for entertainment and not to watch footage about wars and massacres. Quite often, filmmakers “deliberately staged events posing as newsreels” without informing the audience of the film’s true nature.<sup>412</sup> Such was the case with several Drankov’s films, which incorporated foreign footage with Russian intertitles to mislead the viewer that the filming was done in the Russian Empire.

Despite keeping this genre relatively apolitical, theaters became popular gathering places and propaganda vehicles for leftist groups even before patriotically-themed, anti-German productions flooded screens in 1914. “The censor kept guard over all matters concerning the delicate present,” writes Leyda. “Newsreels were minutely examined; even the powerful Pathé-Journal (shown in Russia as *Mirror of the World*) appeared on Russian screens minus any news of real importance.”<sup>413</sup> But the country’s volatile situation gradually affected the film industry, which was recognized as a powerful source of propaganda. For example, one anti-Semitic group proposed the idea of staging a pogrom for the sole purpose of filming it. The idea was rejected not because of its unethical nature, but because of fears that a boycott by democratic circles would result in a commercial failure. At a time when the Catholic Church fully exploited the benefits of cinema as a tool for religious education,<sup>414</sup> the Russian clergy developed an austere approach to film, which they regarded as a hostile intruder and the Russian Orthodox Church

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<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 40. Original italics.

<sup>414</sup> Imported films that showed biblical stories were popular but scrutinized by Russian censors. For instance, two productions of *Life and Passion of Christ* — the first by the Lumières and Hatot in 1898 and the second by Ferdinand Zecca for Pathé in 1903 — were immediately prohibited and were only released in movie theaters four years later in 1907. The revolution of 1917 eliminated the religious censorship, allowing motion pictures on religious themes to be shown; among the most notable ones were Iakov Protazanov’s *Satan Triumphant* [Satana likuiushchii] (1917) and *Father Sergius* [Otets Sergii] (1918).

decided to protect itself from “the blasphemous cinematograph.”<sup>415</sup> Costume dramas that overwhelmingly focused on pre-Petrine times, before the church answered to the state, tended to avoid religious imagery altogether so as not to incur the wrath of the censors. On March 30 (April 11), 1898, the Holy Synod issued a special resolution prohibiting the display of the image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints in cinema.<sup>416</sup> As I have noted in chapter 2, this is the same treatment that the Russian Orthodox Church accorded stage productions that dealt with the portrayal of saints, as was the case with Evreinov’s *Comedy about Adam*, which was prohibited from being staged at the Ancient Theater. In some instances, attempts were made to show religious rituals despite the general avoidance of religious themes in historical dramas.<sup>417</sup> Religion remained the provenance of documentary shorts. Forestier, for example, remembered filming the ritual of bathing in icy waters to mark Epiphany. “I did not understand what kind of ritual I was being sent to film, and for some reason I imagined something similar to a carnival,”<sup>418</sup> he wrote and proceeded to describe the shock at seeing men undress, jump into and swim in the freezing waters. As time went on, filmmakers learned how to film around difficult subjects. Drankov, for example, would eventually produce documentaries about the 1911 famine in the Volga region, life in the Sakhalin labor camps, and the migration of peasants to Siberia.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Leyda, 47.

<sup>416</sup> *The Decree of the Holy Synod from March 30, 1898* [Opredelenie Sviateishego Sinoda ot 30 marta, 1898 goda].

<sup>417</sup> *A Picture of Easter from the Times of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich*\* [Paskhal’naia kartinka (Iz vremen tsaria Alekseia Mikhailovicha)] (1910) is an “acted” film that supposedly depicted Easter morning in Moscow (Vishnevskii, *Khudozhestvennye fil’mi*, 12.) and was most likely inspired by paintings, engravings, and maybe even postcards. In these documentaries, however, the celebrations of various religious ceremonies proved to be a popular subject.

<sup>418</sup> Forestier, 41.

<sup>419</sup> Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, 29.

## 5. *The Tsar's Chronicles*

“I consider cinematography an empty, useless and even pernicious diversion,” Nikolai II wrote on the margin of a police report in 1912. “Only an abnormal person could place this sideshow business on a level with art. It is all nonsense, and no importance should be lent to such trash.”<sup>420</sup> What Leyda translates as “sideshow business” can perhaps be better rendered as “*balagan* trade” (балаганный промысел), terminology and an attitude reminiscent of Nikolai II’s favorite predecessor, Aleksei Mikhailovich, whose disdain for *skomorokhs*, with their *balagan* entertainment, led to a decree prohibiting their performances. Nikolai II’s public declaration of film as a nuisance did not quite reflect his real views on this new medium. Like his grandfather, Aleksandr II, who forty years earlier allowed the day of his coronation in 1856 to be captured by early photographers,<sup>421</sup> Nikolai II did not object to the filming of his coronation, which took place only days after the first film by the Lumières brothers was shown to the Russian public. He thus became the only tsar whose years in power were captured on film. Not only did Nikolai II enjoy watching himself on the screen, but he owned a private movie theater where the footage of the imperial family’s private and public outings could be played. In the beginning, these films were not created for public screening, but it soon became obvious that they could be used for purposes of the state. Likhachev’s writes that 9.5% of the documentaries produced from 1908 to 1912 were devoted to the ceremonies, processions or leisure times of the Russian imperial family, which attests to the public’s considerable interest in seeing the monarch

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<sup>420</sup> Cited in Leyda, 69.

<sup>421</sup> See photographs by Sergei Levitskii and Friedrich Mebius.

on the screen.<sup>422</sup> By 1917, these films represented approximately one-third of all documentary material.

Films that featured various state ceremonies or inaugural events, which included members of the Russian Imperial family, became known as the “tsar’s chronicles” (царская хроника). Nothing “staged” history more effectively on film than this curious documentary genre. For example, the list of films that were produced in 1907 contains a number of these tsar’s chronicles, such as the footage of the emperor with his entourage, the meeting between Nikolai II and Kaiser Wilhelm II in Swinemünde, the consecration of the church in St. Petersburg, and parades of troops in Tsarskoe Selo and in front of the Winter and Peterhof Palaces. The ban on showing these films to the public, however, was officially lifted only in 1910 after a set of rules was devised on how to properly screen them. “The showing [of the tsar’s chronicles] had to be approved in advance by the Ministry of the Imperial Court,” writes Svetlana Limanova, “and be shown separately from the main [film] program, with the beginning and end of the tsar’s chronicle marked by the lowering and raising of the curtain, a required intermission before the next picture, and without any musical accompaniment.”<sup>423</sup> Later on, the national anthem and military marches were allowed to be played during these screenings. Another requirement was to project these films at a speed that was controlled manually — as opposed to an electric projector — thereby keeping the appearance of the imperial figures on screen dignified at all times.

This list of requirements illustrates how the tsar’s chronicles quickly acquired elements of ritualized performances. The curtains, specific music, and trusted personnel to control the speed of the projector turned these screenings into special, well-rehearsed events. Oksana Chefranova

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<sup>422</sup> Boris Likhachev, 96.

<sup>423</sup> Svetlana Limanova, “Tsarskaia kinokhronika’ i ekrannyi obraz Nikolaia II: ideologicheskaiia transfromatsiia,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 107 (2016): <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/7431> (accessed June 17, 2018).

asserts that Nikolai II, as the principal performer of the tsar's chronicles, became at once the subject and object of these films.<sup>424</sup> Since the main purpose of these documentaries lay in promoting the image of the monarch, they soon became an important part of the state's propaganda machine as well. "These films," writes Wortman, "gave the public glimpses of [Nikolai II] at various ceremonial occasions, including the Borodino festivities, the tercentenary processions in Petersburg and Moscow, the Blessing of the Waters, military reviews, parades of the *poteshnye* regiments, the launching of ships, and receptions of foreign dignitaries."<sup>425</sup> Although aimed at celebrating the central myth of the tsar as the nation's father, the tsar's chronicles inadvertently undermined this very myth. While watching the emperor on screen for the first time, common people who would ordinarily never have had a chance to observe the tsar had to take notice of such perplexities as Nikolai II's height or the fact that the heir was often carried around by a servant. As quickly as the tsar's chronicles shot to popularity, they began to wane, in part because the quality of acted films was rapidly improving. "To retain the attention of the viewers [of the tsar's chronicle] with the ever-expanding film repertoire was extremely difficult," writes Limanova, "especially since despite the large number of celebratory occasions, the 'tsar's chronicle' was monotonous. The camera remained fixed on one spot, shooting from the same angle, while sound and color were absent."<sup>426</sup>

Although the films' goal of chronicling various state occasion explains why they became known as chronicles, the analogy with the literary genre of medieval chronicles is sometimes made explicit. "Monarchies played a role in developing this particular philosophy of film — film

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<sup>424</sup> Oksana Chefranova, "The Tsar and The Kinematograph: Film and History and The Chronicle of the Russian Monarchy," in *Beyond the Screen: Institutions, Networks, and Publics of Early Cinema*, ed. Marta Braun, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 63.

<sup>425</sup> Wortman, 485. Original italics.

<sup>426</sup> Limanova, "'Tsarskaia kinokhronika' i ekranni obraz Nikolaia II."

as history,” writes Chefranova. “The Chronicle films envisioned history as a non-hierarchical panoramic stream with no beginning and no end, as fragments arbitrarily pulled out of the stream of life.”<sup>427</sup> As fragments of life, the purpose of the tsar’s chronicles, just like the purpose of scribes writing medieval chronicles, was also to create a historical record. Additionally, this film genre did promote certain medieval sensibilities such as presenting the imperial court within the bounds of its strict hierarchical structure. For example, this is how Mosolov describes a typical imperial procession at the court, many of which were captured by early filmmakers:

After the Tsar’s entry into the Concert Room, the procession began to form. The principal dignitaries of the Court remained facing Their Majesties until the Masters of Ceremonies indicated to them that they had to lead the procession, in the order of their ‘proximity’ to the Tsar. The Sovereigns followed immediately after the principle dignitaries of the Court. They were followed by the members of the Imperial family. Then came the ladies of the Court, the other high dignitaries, the Ministers, the Senators, and the military suite.<sup>428</sup>

The attention to the precedence according to rank was always one of the characteristics of the tsar’s chronicles, a feature inherited from the medieval court of the past where the performance of hierarchies served as the backbone of every imperial ceremony. During the Middle Ages, the courtly processions became an opportunity for people to see their monarch and those closest to him in the order of their ranks. This same tradition was revived in the films. The public had a chance to see their emperor followed by the members of his family who were, in turn, followed by dignitaries, followed by the officials, and so on. This film genre came to play an important part in the tercentenary celebrations of the Romanov Dynasty. “The effort to popularize the tsar’s image in 1913 led to the lifting of the ban on the presentation of Romanov tsars on the stage,”<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Chefranova, 65-66.

<sup>428</sup> Mosolov, 190.

<sup>429</sup> Wortman, 484.

writes Wortman. Films, in particular, benefited from this change as two costume dramas dedicated to the rule of the Romanov house were on order to commemorate the event, and one of them was about to challenge the rules by making the tsar's chronicles a part of the story.

#### 6. *Starring the Tsar!*

The plot of Khanzhonkov's film, *The Accession of the House of Romanov* [Votsarenie doma Romanovykh] (1913) focuses on the Time of Troubles — the period when Muscovy was without a tsar — in a series of historical *tableaux vivants*. Like the emperor who, that same year, made pilgrimages to emulate his ancestor's accession to the throne, the filmmakers tried to glorify the appointment of Mikhail Romanov and present the Romanov dynasty as “savior” of the country during this period of unrest. The first cinematic *tableau* is set in 1610 and depicts the Muscovite boyars negotiating the appointment of Władysław of Poland as the next tsar of Russia on the condition that he be baptized into the Orthodox faith. The *tableaux* that follow elaborate on the series of intrigues between the Russian and Polish sides in this power struggle. Incidentally, the film includes a large portion of another costume drama, which was filmed but never finished in 1911 — a screen adaptation of Glinka's famous opera, *A Life for the Tsar* — which Khanzhonkov produced several years before but never finished. The film culminates with the appointment of young Mikhail and his triumphant entry into Moscow on a white stallion during a snowy winter (instead of late spring, the same factual error as in Drankov's film) to greet his people. Khanzhonkov's intention for this film was to exploit the same leitmotif of the tsar-savior that was so prominent in all medieval recreations that year. This cinematic presentation of the Romanov dynasty as God-sent rescuers of a country in disarray pleased the imperial court.

Khazhnikov's memoirs, published in 1937 when he was already seriously-ill and living in the Crimea, omit any mention of the production.<sup>430</sup> Although only 86 copies of the film were made (in comparison with the 107 copies of Drankov's), Khazhnikov received praise and better reviews for the accuracy of his historical recreation of the past. A surprisingly overlooked innovation of *The Accession of the House of Romanov* is that the leading role of young Mikhail was played by a woman. The memoirs of Sof'ia Goslavskaia, who was twenty-two when she was entrusted with the task of portraying the first Romanov tsar, provide more insight into this historical production.



Figure 25: Still from Khazhnikov's tercentenary production featuring Sof'ia Goslavskaia as "Mikhail" (left).

"I was called to the 'lesson' given by a historian-consultant, who should have taught me the details of young Mikhail's accession to the throne," remembers Goslavskaia. "I was given the role of ... a tsarevich!"<sup>431</sup> Goslavskaia's role as the young tsar — the role that was "played" by Nikolai II himself during his pilgrimage later that year — attests to the relaxation of attitudes

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<sup>430</sup> The reason for this was likely the hand of the Soviet censor who considerably "edited" these memoirs. The Soviets recognized their value as depository of historical materials about early film, but ascribed Khazhnikov's decision to film historical epics that glorified the slain tsar to his "nationalistic and chauvinistic" beliefs.

<sup>431</sup> Sof'ia Goslavskaia, *Zapiski kinoaktrisy* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974), 139-140.

toward this new medium, considering that only five years before an unnamed and uncredited actress played the Persian princess in *Sten'ka Razin*. “The male actors, even the younger ones, are rough around the edges, lack charisma, and aristocratism,” Chardynin, the film’s director, noted when explaining the decision to hire a young actress for the important role, “whereas actresses in *travesti* roles are stereotypes.”<sup>432</sup> Women had long been playing male parts successfully on stage, but to let a woman play the role of a tsar in the film, which would be produced during the jubilee year and would be watched by the monarch, was a risky decision.

Not to be outdone, Drankov presented his version of the Romanov story in a two-part production, *The House of Romanov* [Trekhsotletie tsarstvovaniia doma Romanovykh] (1913). The film narrates the lineage of the Romanov Dynasty in a succession of *tableaux vivants* that depict selected rulers from Mikhail to Nikolai II. The first part of Drankov’s film is not that different from Khanzhonkov’s as it also replays the appointment of young Mikhail to the throne of Muscovy. Critics deemed the film inferior to Khanzhonkov’s production, which presented the historical *tableaux* as a more balanced, accurate, and less rushed sequence. The role of young Mikhail Romanov in Drankov’s film was played by Mikhail Chekhov. Unlike Goslavskaia, who recalls meticulous preparations and careful coaching to make sure she understood how to play the tsar, Chekhov remembered the production as a disorganized and chaotic affair. This is how Chekhov describes the scene of young Mikhail’s initial reluctance to accept the throne: “When I appeared at the gates, I heard some despairing voices shouting up from below, from the camera: ‘Abdicate! Get on with it! We’ve only got two meters left! Hurry up! Abdicate!’ I abdicated — as well as I could.”<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>433</sup> Michael Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, eds. Andrei Kirillov and Bella Merlin (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 55.



*Figure 26:* Still from Drankov's tercentenary production featuring Mikhail Chekhov as "Mikhail." The young tsar is coming down to greet the people who elected him.



*Figure 27:* Still from Drankov's tercentenary production featuring Tsar Mikhail and his tutor, Boyar Morozov.

The production's second part was influenced by a promise Drankov made to film up to the coronation of Nikolai II.<sup>434</sup> The decision to show the highlights of the dynasty — all of it in the second part — makes Drankov's version more ambitious. The eclectic selection of episodes in the second part included: Aleksei Mikhailovich, including his interaction with Boyar Morozov; Khmel'nitskyi's pledge of allegiance to Muscovy; the revision of the church service

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<sup>434</sup> Leyda, 64.

books during Patriarch Nikon's reforms; and Peter I directing shipbuilding. Ekaterina (Catherine) II awarding soldiers after the Turkish war is the last monarch to be portrayed by an actor in a *tableau* that is followed by the training of Russian troops to follow Prussian military methods during her son's reign.



*Figure 28: Stills from Drankov's tercentenary production featuring the historical sequence with marble busts of Aleksandr I and Nikolai I in their social milieu and Aleksandr II's surrounded by serfs.*

Although Khanzhonkov had escaped reprisal for casting a woman as the young Romanov tsar, the same approach to the portrayals of more recent Romanovs was still inconceivable and presented a challenge. “The studios had to be very careful not to get into censorship trouble by too harsh a depiction of any Romanov ancestors,” reminds Youngblood, “which meant that historical subjects were mainly selected for their pictorial or legendary value.”<sup>435</sup> To portray the nineteenth-century monarchs, Drankov found an original solution by presenting Aleksandr I, Nikolai I, and Aleksandr II via marble busts surrounded by their contemporaries (and, in the case of Aleksandr II, serfs) who were dressed in historically accurate costumes. Aleksandr III’s portrait, which took up a half-second of screen time, was a fitting tribute to his years as the emperor.

The most creative component of Drankov’s historical sequence is the inclusion of fragments from the tsar’s chronicles. This deliberate integration of the documentary genre with “acted” film immediately broke a number of rules. For one, there could no longer be a curtain raised and lowered to separate the two genres in movie theaters. Several years before, Khanzhonkov employed a similar technique with his historical film *The Defense of Sevastopol* [Oborona Sevastopolia] (1911), which earned him the St. Stanislav cross of the second degree from the emperor himself. This historical drama told the story of the Siege of Sevastopol during the Crimean War (1854-1855) and ended with documentary shots of the decorated veterans stepping in front of the camera one by one. Drankov, in turn, included such fragments as Nikolai II’s coronation from 1896, the inaugural ceremony of the monument to Aleksandr III in 1909, and the Borodino celebration.

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<sup>435</sup> Youngblood, *The Magic Mirror*, 116.



Figure 29: Still from Drankov's tercentenary production featuring Nikolai II.

The performance of these imperial events retained functions similar to those during the Middle Ages, namely, to inform society about existing hierarchies. It seems logical, therefore, that at a time when his power was severely compromised, Nikolai II gravitated toward ceremonies that depended on a structured performance. The collage of the most notable representatives of the Romanov dynasty in Drankov's film, from its first one — portrayed by Chekhov — to the last one — self-portrayed by Nikolai II, through the combination of fictional and non-fictional footage was an original and innovative solution that aimed to celebrate the monarchical idea.<sup>436</sup>

The emperor viewed both films on February 16 (March 1), 1913 and praised the producers for excelling in recreating history.<sup>437</sup> Both productions built on everything that had been learned about filming costume dramas to present the past of the Romanovs in all its glory. The reason for the popularity of Drankov's film over Khanzhonkov's was the second part, which

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<sup>436</sup> A. Ivonin's *Tsar Nicholas II, Russia's Autocrat* [Tsar' Nikolai II, samoderzhets vserossiiskii] (1917), which was released shortly before the Revolution, also combined the genres of acted film with the documentary materials, including the tsar's chronicles. The film emphasized the contrast, which would then be used in the Soviet propaganda, between people's poverty and tsar's opulent lifestyle.

<sup>437</sup> *The Fall of the Romanoffs*\* (1917) is a silent American film that depicts the Romanov Dynasty's final years. The film was released months after Nikolai II's abdication and is presumed lost.

presented recent and contemporary history in which for the first (and last) time, the tsar became a character in a film. This innovation could also be seen as an attempt to boost the documentary genre, which was no longer as popular as it once had been and whose function as propaganda failed miserably. Nikolai II's inclusion into the historical timeline next to his ancestors, the most recent of whom were represented via visual pieces of high art, appeared to have worked against him. "This coexistence of the hieratic artifacts with the living presence of the emperor rendered through cinematic images, making everything and everyone look similar on the screen, shows that the myth of the emperor began to lose its monological dimension," explains Chefranova. "The acquiring of mass publicity through film accelerated the erosion of monarchical sovereignty as immutable and constant through the centuries."<sup>438</sup> The aggrandizement of the tsar's image that inspired medieval reenactments at the court did not have a chance with film where it neither kept up with cinematic innovations nor projected a required presence.

### 7. *Staging Debauch*

If the myth of a tsar failed to translate to screen, the myth of an ongoing rebellion could not be made explicit because of strict censorship. *Sten'ka Razin* represents, perhaps, the most successful articulation of this revolutionary impulse in early Russian cinema. "[Drankov's] choice of the subject [in *Sten'ka Razin*] and atmosphere for the first Russian dramatic film was calculated to appeal directly to the romantic needs of that class of people which composed the film audience," writes Leyda. "This film audience had experienced a revolution and, though temporarily defeated, was now conscious of a strength they had not dreamed of before."<sup>439</sup> The choice of Razin as the first cinematic hero spoke to this strength and could also be seen as the

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<sup>438</sup> Chefranova, 69.

<sup>439</sup> Leyda, 35.

articulation of society's symbolic struggle against the regime, particularly since *Sten'ka Razin* was screened in movie theaters only three years after the Revolution of 1905. Leyda, who became acquainted with Drankov, then a Russian émigré living in the United States, was convinced that the film's producer was successfully playing both fronts. "Drankov chose to attract and conciliate [audiences] with the character of [Sten'ka] Razin, an almost legendary figure of heroism, a symbol of the Russian people rising against their oppressors," he writes. "Conscious, as he was, of his audience's nature, he was even more conscious of his own class affiliations — and proceeded to water down the hero of the Volga to the dimensions of a gay, singing, drunken brigand who meets a sad end."<sup>440</sup> Drankov found the ideal hero in Stepan Razin (ca.1630-1671), the legendary Cossack from the Don region, who was celebrated for his "cult-of-the-outlaw"; the cult that, as the Ukrainian philologist and historian Mykola Kostomarov asserts, gave the ataman a reputation as "the patron and avenger of those who were suffering or were oppressed."<sup>441</sup> The major difference in the selection of historical episodes between Drankov and, say, Méliès is that unlike Joan of Arc, who was celebrated and canonized for fighting in the name of her king, much of Razin's appeal originated in the act of rebellion against his sovereign.

Drankov's decision to film the story of this Russian *bogatyr*' was inspired by the countless folktales and legends surrounding the so-called myth of Razin, which portrayed this Cossack as superhuman. Kostomarov credits the presence of a strong mystical element in the tales about Razin to his enduring charismatic appeal. "The people," Kostomarov writes, "sensed in [Razin] some kind of unprecedented force, which they could not resist, and named [Razin] a

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Nikolai Kostomarov, *Ruskaia istoriia v zhizneopisaniakh ee glavneishikh deiatelei*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Svarog, 1995), 91.

sorcerer.”<sup>442</sup> Over two hundred years after the revolt, Razin figured prominently in the national memory as someone who possessed powers to enchant weapons, intimidate animals, and remain invincible to bullets. Drankov’s film set against the background of the bucolic Russian countryside celebrated the revelry of the Russian Middle Ages and love of the people for Razin’s legend. Since Razin’s rebellion was in many ways a reaction against *the Assembly Code of 1649* (Соборное уложение) — the law that emphasized the absolute power of landowners over serfs, as well as power of the church — movie-goers had to recognize a number of parallels with this seventeenth-century revolt. Two hundred and fifty years later, the topic of serfdom was still a difficult one. A state resolution from February 16 (March 1), 1911, prohibited the screening of films made on the semi-centennial anniversary of the liberation of the serfs (*On the Eve of the Manifesto of February 19* [Nakanune manifesta 19 fevralia] (1911) and *Shield Yourself with the Sign of the Cross, O People of the Orthodox Faith* [Oseni sebia krestnym znameniem, pravoslavnyi russkii narod] (1911)), a ban that was eventually lifted. Although the film’s main theme, the love story between Razin and the princess, shifted the focus away from the historical truth about the nature of the Cossack’s revolt and its leader, hence guaranteeing smooth sailing with the state censors, many had to acknowledge that the tsar’s power over his people in the beginning of the twentieth century remained absolute.

*Sten’ka Razin* consists of six episodes and begins with two large and several smaller boats sailing down the Volga River.<sup>443</sup> One of the boats carries Razin, who, as Youngblood

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>443</sup> The decision to base *Sten’ka Razin* on a fragment of the libretto from Dmitrii Sadovnikov’s popular folk song, *From Beyond the Island* [Iz-za ostrova na strezhen’], the musical score of *Down the Mother Volga* [Vniz po matushke po Volge], and an overture composed by Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov, was foremost a practical one: whatever technical shortcomings there were (and there were plenty) in these early attempts at filming uninterrupted, self-sufficient narratives, the audience effortlessly followed the story’s development. *Sten’ka Razin* is an example of *kinolubok*, with the folk drama *The Boat* [Lodka] as its primary (*lubok*) source. Despite the reputation of *kinolubok* as a commercial and primitive vehicle of story-telling, film scholars praised it as a method for enlightening the

notes, is virtually indistinguishable from the rest of his gang in the opening sequence unless accompanied by the princess. The film revolves around a gang's plot against the princess — incidentally via a letter to her supposed lover in a melodramatic twist, which was never a part of the legend or song, — which leads to the ataman's jealous outburst and the final act of sacrifice with Razin tossing the body of his allegedly unfaithful lover into the raging waters. The last seconds of the film proved to be the most effective dramatically, enhanced by Razin's words for the beloved river: "Mother Volga, you gave me water; you fed me and rocked me on your waves," ran the inter-titles. "Accept my precious gift." In the center of it all (although, quite often off center and even outside the frame) was the figure of Razin himself (played by Evgenii Petrov-Kraevskii) and surrounded by actors from the Petersburg's People House who agreed to take part in the production. Any theater-trained actor at the time would have considered film acting beneath his or her skill or talent.<sup>444</sup> The scene of the debauch (разгул) in the forest is the only moment in the sequence of these cinematic *tableaux* that indirectly alludes to the topic of peasant revolt. Surrounded by his men and the princess, the scene depicts the hero celebrating in a joyous atmosphere. Historically, the notion of debauch as a chaotic disorder that is both attractive and repulsive is responsible for the appeal of such figures as Stepan Razin and Emel'ian Pugachev, Kondratii Bulavin and Ermak Timofeevich. The notion of a *muzhik* holding enough power in his hands to scare the tsar himself may have been ignored in the film but not in peoples' memory of this historical figure, thereby shattering another myth of the tsar's

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viewer about national history and its famous figures." (Ginzburg, 119). The episodes relied on *lubok* as their story-telling device, and *kinolubok* denotes its film equivalent, frequently applied to the costume dramas of the period. [Neia Zorkaia, *Fol'klor. Lubok. Ekran* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994), 17.]

<sup>444</sup> Drankov's first attempt at shooting a motion picture was also an exercise in medievalism and took place one year earlier. The process of filming a theatrical production of *Boris Godunov* was unexpectedly derailed after the actor who played the part of Godunov refused to appear onscreen. Drankov did not despair for long and resourcefully combined the filmed episodes for release that same year under the title of *Scenes from a Boyar Life* [Stseny iz boiarskoi zhizni] (1907).

connection with people, which was being so lavishly performed during this time by Nikolai II's court.



Figure 30: Still from Drankov's *Sten'ka Razin* featuring the scene in the forest.

The dramatic finale of *Sten'ka Razin*, which featured the enraged Cossack throwing his love interest overboard as punishment for her alleged infidelity, became one of the most memorable cinematic moments in the history of Russian film. The murderous act stresses the melodramatic function of the narrative where the dramatic loss of life, captured in the final seconds of the reel, glorify Razin's choice, which was historically interpreted as a choice between Russia and Asia, between his Cossack brothers and a female intruder. The princess must die in order for peace to be restored among the Cossacks and to purge the community of its foreign element. From this perspective, her death prevents more violence and functions as something that Girard refers to as "the scapegoat mechanism."<sup>445</sup> Razin's murder can thus be seen as entering a realm of sacrifice that initiates the process of redress and rescues this Cossack community or, at least temporarily, delays its disintegration. At the same time, film also depicts a rebellion against Razin who himself is presented as an authority figure. The concept of rebellion

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<sup>445</sup> Girard, 271.

may not be overt with the portrayal of Razin in this film, but it is overt with the rebellion of Razin's men against their leader which forces the ataman to kill the princess. Hence the suggestion that the authority figure must succumb to the demands of his subjects is present in a plot twist that makes the ideological message of Drankov's film complex and ambivalent.

Critics praised Drankov for excelling in the task of “photographing,”<sup>446</sup> which was one of many names for filmmaking when cinematic language was still developing,<sup>447</sup> while the public cheered the success of this first cinematic attempt at showing a popular story. The glowing reviews of *Sten'ka Razin* encouraged Russian filmmakers to continue filming episodes from various historical narratives, powered by the enthusiastic support of the press for the direction that the native film industry was taking. The latter had everything to do with the rise of nationalist sentiments at the time that was encouraged by the government. The scripts, based on well-known literary works or tales gleaned from popular songs and folklore provided the field for experiments but even here the producers had to be careful in how they approached it. “One subject was forbidden from the earliest days — that of the French Revolution, no matter how indirectly it figured in the action of the drama,” writes Leyda. “Along with it was banned any film showing the guillotine or the violent death of royalty.”<sup>448</sup> As it turns out, the list of prohibited topics inevitably grew longer to include, for example, anti-governmental protests. As other historical films followed *Sten'ka Razin* onto the screens none of them alluded to the seed of rebellion as being ever-present in the Russian society as skillfully as did the first “acted” film, but all of them collectively fulfilled their primary function to entertain.

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<sup>446</sup> *Vestnik kinematografov v Sankt-Peterburge 1* (1908): 6.

<sup>447</sup> Other names for ‘film’ included *sinema* (синема), *kinema* (кинема), *fil'ma* (фильма), *kinematografiia* (кинематография), *sinematografiia* (синематография), *live photograph* (живая фотография), etc.

<sup>448</sup> Leyda, 29.

## 8. *Conclusions*

“This aesthetic thug and hooligan,” as Andreev referred to film, was gaining popularity so rapidly that it was soon perceived to bear the responsibility “of freeing theater from an enormous load of useless things.”<sup>449</sup> During these early years of its development, film was still inheriting techniques from theater, photography, and art, which, quite often, led to regard it as their extension as opposed to a new visual medium. The war between theater and film continued through the 1900s, with film being considered as theater’s inferior and no more than an advertisement for acting; and after receiving a cold shoulder from its rival, cinema increasingly sought inspiration in painting and sculpture.<sup>450</sup> Costume dramas considerably sped up the development of the native film industry in the years prior to World War I when Russian cinema lagged behind its western counterparts by about a decade. Native productions, however, soon eliminated the need for the import of foreign films and replaced them with an abundance of their own historical epics, which were still largely imitations of foreign period-pictures.<sup>451</sup> The thematic selections of these early films tended to focus on the nation’s critical historical events and episodes from the lives of key historical figures. Stories based on folk songs or texts that included the customs and traditions of the Middle Ages helped to elucidate the plot and compensate for any technical deficiencies. Another reason for the popularity of these films was

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<sup>449</sup> Leonid Andreev, vol. 6 of *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990-1996), 511.

<sup>450</sup> The influence of painting on film was evident in the costume dramas, some of which strived to imitate the paintings of such famous Russian artists as Konstantin Makovskii or Viktor Vasnetsov, who were enamored with medieval themes. Filmmakers would later come to recognize painting as the predecessor for the motion picture industry that preceded Edison’s *kinoscope*, Lumières’ *cinématographe*, and even the magic lantern (*lanterna magica*) itself that popularized the practice of storytelling through the projection of images in the seventeenth century. See, for example, Manana Andronikova’s *How old is the cinema? [Skol’ko let kino?]* (1968).

<sup>451</sup> “Foreign films dominated theatre programmes all over the country. No matter how popularly [*Sten’ka*] *Razin* was received, Cines’ *Sack of Rome* or Pathé’s *Cleopatra* attracted larger Russian audiences.” (Leyda, 47).

their ability to stir the public's patriotic feelings and mesmerize it with the sight of powerful medieval rulers winning battles, punishing enemies, negotiating treaties, expanding lands, or resolving family matters. Forestier wrote about Russians being "big patriots" to the extent that, as a movie audience, they tended to be much kinder to their native productions than to the foreign films, even if the latter were technically superior.<sup>452</sup>

"By the end of 1913," writes Leyda, "nine Russian magazines and newspapers devoted to cinema affairs were in weekly and monthly circulation."<sup>453</sup> One of these magazines was Khanzhonkov's *Cinema Herald* [Vestnik kinematografii], which permanently featured a Russian *bogatyr* in full armor, who was either bursting out of an enormous egg or stood proud with a film reel coiled around him. As time went on, the excessiveness of these films without any sound and color in itself became a convention. Whether these native productions depicted a tsar and his courtiers, pagan celebrations, or the dramatic act of taking somebody's life, they made use of the narrative power of ritual as an effective device for storytelling. "The actor was required to move, gesticulate, and mimic at all times," remembered those working in the Russian film industry during its early years, "this was necessary in order to continue stressing the difference between cinema and still photography."<sup>454</sup> To be sure, the actors in these costume dramas so relied on movement that they abused the power of gesture. Likhachev's labeling of 1912 as the year when the native industry made its important shift toward film as an art form, coincides with the time when costume dramas were beginning to lose their relevance and Russian cinema was gradually rejecting its reliance on movement. It is no coincidence, then, that the films produced during the

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<sup>452</sup> Forestier, 30.

<sup>453</sup> Leyda, 61.

<sup>454</sup> Vera Khanzhonkova, "Iz vospominanii o dorevoliutsionnom kino," in *Iz istorii kino: materialy i dokumenty*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Academiaiia nauk SSSR, 1962), 121.

period between World War I and the Bolshevik revolution — when the film industry was cut off from its international partners and relied almost exclusively on its own productions — are described as “static.”<sup>455</sup>

In 1921, Arkadii Averchenko, then a recent émigré from Soviet Russia, published a collection of humorous short stories, one of which was *The Trick of Great Cinema* [Fokus velikogo kino]. The story begins with the narrator, who sits down by the fireplace, grabs a drink, and gets ready to enjoy a set of documentary shorts about important historical moments from the previous decades. He does not, however, watch the films chronologically but instead makes them play in reverse. “How useful it can sometimes be to send the film backwards!”<sup>456</sup> He exclaims happily as he watches the familiar events appear before his eyes. Beginning with the Bolshevik revolution to the horrors of the World War I, to the years of Stolypin’s reaction, the film magically “undoes” and heals the historical wounds. “Quickly they flash before me, one after another, the fourth Duma, the third, the second, the first, and now the terrible details of the October pogroms loom clearly on the screen,” utters the narrator. “But they are not frightening. Attackers pull their knives out of the chests of the dead, and the dead come alive, get up, and run away, while the feathers in the air neatly fly back into the beds of Jewish families, and everything assumes its previous form.”<sup>457</sup> He proclaims the day of the Manifesto of October 17

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<sup>455</sup> Fedor Otsep, a Russian-American screenwriter and film director wrote down an idea about a potential book project about the silent film of 1914-1917. In his notes, he identified three schools of cinematography: 1) Movements: The American School; 2) Forms: The European School; 3) The Psychological: The Russian School. (Tsivian, *Velikii kinemo*, 9.) Had Otsep’s classification focused on 1908-1912, he most certainly would have identified “Movement” as a trademark of early Russian cinema where it often presented some form of a ritualized behavior that helped to clarify the plot, compensate for the lack of sound, color, or close-ups, and forced the filmmakers to find creative solutions. The limited screen time made movement particularly germane to the performance of various rituals, thereby imparting to them the power to relay emotions non-verbally and purely through gestures, which could be at times no less effective than the presence of the inter-titles.

<sup>456</sup> Arkadii Averchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Terra-Knizhnyi klub, 2007), 378.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

(30), 1905, with the celebratory crowds full of strangers hugging each other in the streets, as the happiest of days. This is when the narrator orders the film paused and, overcome with tears of nostalgia for his youth and for his country, he sits listening to the crackling fire while staring at the frozen frame on the silent screen.

The costume dramas that flooded the movie theaters during the early years of Russian cinema functioned much like the flashbacks in Averchenko's story, eclectically presenting moments from the nation's heroic past. The audiences, it seems, did not mind the unrealistic aspects of these films and cheered the efforts of the filmmakers that transformed them into the witnesses of Russia's turbulent present. Much like the function of *tableaux* as a political instrument for enforcing the ideology, the myths of tsar and revolution emerge anew in these costume dramas. On one hand, medievalism and ritualism in movies appear to have nothing to do with the underlying causes that triggered performances of ritual at the imperial court and in mystery plays; on the other, these performances also address the nature of national myths, both of which failed to endure. Lured into the theaters by the sound of "mystical clicking" ("мистическое чиканье"),<sup>458</sup> as Belyi referred to the noise of the cinema's projector, the public found in cinema a refuge from the horrors of the present, which, at least for a short time, replaced the acute sense of foreboding with that of aesthetic pleasure.

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<sup>458</sup> Belyi, *Arabeski*, 351.

## Conclusion

Each chapter of this dissertation begins with an example of medieval restoration from three nodes of cultural production during the last years of the Russian Empire. Our introduction examines the medievalism of Nikolai II's coronation ceremony. Chapter 1 discusses the imperial ball of 1903 in commemoration of the anniversary of the Romanov Dynasty. Chapter 2 focuses on the opening of the Ancient Theater in 1907. Chapter 3 examines the premiere of *Sten'ka Razin*, the first Russian-acted film, in 1908. All of these manifestations of the medieval phenomenon illustrate how Russian culture asserts itself during the *fin de siècle* by integrating modernity with the complex historical period of the Middle Ages. Berdiaev, for example, who is credited with popularizing the concept of the New Middle Ages, notes the negative characteristics of medieval times such as barbarity, vulgarity, cruelty, violence, slavery, ignorance in the field of nature and history, and religious terror associated with the horror of infernal torment. But he also identifies the positive features that justify the appeal of this historical period during a particularly unstable time in the Russian history. "The culture of the Middle Ages was directed toward the transcendental and otherworldly," he writes. "During those centuries there was a great development of thought in scholasticism and mysticism to solve existential questions, the kind of effort which the modern history does not know."<sup>459</sup>

The reign of Nikolai II from 1894 to 1917 was a time filled with massacres, political instability, and missed opportunities to reform Russia's Byzantine rule into a semi-progressive, if not democratic, state. "[Russia] is permeated with sedition and reeking with revolution, racial hatred and warfare, murder, incendiarism, brigandage, robbery and crime of every kind," reported the US Consul in Batumi on the situation, shortly after the Jewish pogroms of 1905-

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<sup>459</sup> Berdiaev, 23.

1906. “As far as can be seen we are on the high road to complete anarchy and social chaos.”<sup>460</sup>

The artistic expressions of the medieval aesthetic at the court, on the stage, in literature and film embrace the allure of this bygone era, whereas the persistent effort to recreate this period functions like an unconscious fantasy of a society in the midst of crisis; a society that latches onto reassuring and pleasing images of the past. From this perspective, the collective regression into the Middle Ages at the beginning of the twentieth century, can be seen as a defense mechanism and an imagined fulfillment of desires when dealing with a world that constituted a constant threat and source of disappointment.

World War I appears to drastically disrupt — and, in the instance of court culture, terminate — the medieval “pattern.” For filmed costume dramas, the transition toward a different kind of cinema — a psychological film — begins even earlier, in 1912, and develops rapidly after the war cuts off the native film industry from world markets. The period of 1914-1917 is the time when cinema as “amusement” finally evolves into cinema as an “art form.”<sup>461</sup> Although costume dramas are still produced, they are significantly smaller in number, with the historical epics as film’s once main genre becoming largely obsolete.<sup>462</sup> The situation in the world of Russian dramaturgy, which is the focus of chapter 2, is slightly different. The analyzed mystery/morality plays by Aleksei Remizov, Aleksandr Blok, and Leonid Andreev, written during Stolypin’s Reaction of 1907-1908, are examples of dramas that communicate a sense of ongoing revolt through the framework of medieval symbols and allusions. “[The Revolution of

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<sup>460</sup> Figes, 188.

<sup>461</sup> Roman Sobolev, *Liudi i fil'my russkogo dorevoliutsionnogo kino* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1961), 48.

<sup>462</sup> The fascination, though, with the cult of Grozny continues with *Tsar' Ivan Vasil'evich Grozny* (1915), starring Fedor Shaliapin as Grozny.

1905] shattered something inside my soul and left it in uneven fragments,”<sup>463</sup> remembers Blok. He, who gained a nickname as the epoch’s barometer (барометр эпохи), relays this feeling of uncertainty and pessimism that permeated the society. By this time, the major literary movement of the day — symbolism — with which the concept of a new theater originated, experiences its own schism with two generations of symbolists now promoting significantly different aesthetics. By 1913, the year marking the birth of Russian futurism, symbolism as a movement stops being consequential. Vladimir Maiakovskii’s famous slogan that “theater is not a mirror, but a magnifying glass” is indicative of attention being shifted away from symbols on the stage. The notion that symbolist theater and symbolism were no longer relevant was not lost on playwrights like Andreev, who in 1912 sarcastically refers to it as “our late symbolism.”<sup>464</sup> To Andreev, of course, there is no love lost for a movement with which he was associated only peripherally, but other symbolists also appear to give up on the idea of writing a perfect symbolist drama.<sup>465</sup>

This dissertation argues that the efflorescence of medievalism is a response to the sociopolitical conditions of Nikolai II’s reign, which represents a time of transition. As such, it has all of the hallmarks of what Turner describes as a social drama. Within the context of this paradigm, the period of 1894-1917 may be viewed as a time of destabilization and, following Turner’s processual model, the moment of redress in this four-act political theater. “It is in the redressive phase that both pragmatic techniques and symbolic action reach their fullest

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<sup>463</sup> Blok, vol. 8 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 164.

<sup>464</sup> Andreev, vol. 6 of *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990-1996), 515.

<sup>465</sup> Experimentation with the mystery genre continued throughout the century with, for example, Nikolai Gumilev’s *Gondla* [Gondla] (1917); Vladimir Maiakovskii’s *Mystery-Bouffe* [Misteriia-buff] (1918/1921); Elizaveta Kuz’mina-Karavaeva’s poetic mystery plays of 1930s and 1940s; or *The Iron Mystery Play* [Zheleznaia misteriiia] (1950-1956) by Leonid Andreev’s son, Daniil Andreev.

expression,”<sup>466</sup> writes Turner about this third phase of social drama. In politics, the formation of the Duma is an example of this mechanism, promising as it did a democratic state that, for the first time in Russian history, weakened the autocratic power of the tsar. The years of Nikolai II’s rule as marked by various attempts at *redress*, during which ritual plays the crucial role by eliciting both stabilizing and subversive behaviors. This third stage of social drama is historically among the most unpredictable, argues Turner, of the other four. The events of Russia’s participation in World War I and then the Bolshevik Revolution would indicate that the process of redress, as Turner would have it, had failed.

The *modus operandi* of the aforementioned categories of court culture, drama, and film is the performance of a medieval ritual. My examples include rituals that are real (at Nikolai II’s court) and fictional (in literature and film), but which are united under the broad umbrella of performance. Costume dramas, in particular, are illustrative of how these categories tend to overlap, as they did when fictional plot was combined with documentary footage of the tsar’s chronicles in Drankov’s tercentenary production. To quote Schechner, who emphasizes the fluidity of the relationship between aesthetic and social dramas, “The visible actions of any given social drama are informed, shaped, and guided by aesthetic principles and performance/rhetorical devices. Reciprocally, a culture’s visible aesthetic practices are informed, shaped, and guided by the processes of social interaction.”<sup>467</sup> Whether this is the imperial pilgrimage to honor the Romanov ancestors or the trial of humanity presided over by the allegorical judges in Andreev’s play or the collage of images that include the living emperor in Drankov’s film, these rituals share a sociopolitical sentiment that turns them into idiosyncratic commentaries on the regime.

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<sup>466</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 41.

<sup>467</sup> Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 76.

Performances of these rituals reassess and reconfigure myths of the Middle Ages. On the one hand, rituals as mechanisms of redress attempt to bring stability and resolve conflicts during these times; on the other, they often fail to proceed as intended and disrupt society's equilibrium. The myth of the tsar (in politics) and the myth of the riot (in literature) are the *topoi* that emerge again in the costume dramas. The escalating secularization of post-1905 society — due to rapid urbanization, agrarian reforms, oppressive political regime, weak leadership of an intensely religious monarch, and escalating terror — culminates in an international conflict of 1914 that discards any remnants of this medieval “project.” “Russia never left the Middle Ages,” writes Berdiaev in 1924, years after the peak of medievalism had passed and the country that he knew no longer existed. “[Russia] somehow almost directly passed from the remnants of the old Middle Ages with its old theocracy to the new Middle Ages with its new satanocracy.”<sup>468</sup> In Berdiaev's view, the Bolshevik state is this new version of medieval times, but this research argues that the new Middle Ages asserted themselves in a new light several decades earlier than that during Nikolai II's years as the emperor.

The analyses of the selected medieval performances illustrate how three different cultural spheres employ rituals when enacting their vision of the Middle Ages. The examined correlations between court culture, drama, and film should be considered an impetus for additional research that will focus on the development of medievalism in other arts during this period. Although this dissertation occasionally references examples outside of the three selected areas more research would be necessary to properly examine the nature of this cultural phenomenon and the role of ritual in its revival. The large corpus of examples will most certainly require difficult choices, not unlike those made in chapter 2 that limit selection to the Western European genre of mystery

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<sup>468</sup> Berdiaev, 12-13.

plays as opposed to the dramas, which do not belong to the said genre, but which are also set in the Middle Ages. I hope that this dissertation illustrates that there is strong evidence to suggest that these cultural areas share a deeper structure that articulates the liminal period in Russian history through ritual.

These rituals function as a response to the unstable, shifting movement of values under early twentieth-century capitalism that has no time for tradition. Whether they are real ceremonial processions at the imperial court, or a hero's journey in Blok's drama, or the choice of a jealous Cossack as the first cinematic hero, these present a new take on history and express the bourgeoisie's unconscious fear of disintegration. "This is a *truly* great, truly painful, truly *transitional* time in which we live and which deprives us of all charm," writes Blok, "a thick haze traps us at the crossroads, a distant purple glow of events, which we eagerly anticipate, which we dread, and for which we hope."<sup>469</sup> The poet recognizes how an impending crisis can challenge the foundations of the state and how its apprehension can lead a nation that is already in a fraught state to rediscover the past and reinterpret it anew through the modernist stance of detachment. These efforts to recreate something that no longer exists represent a second-order phenomenon: a tsar who recreates the times of his predecessor with the lavish occasions; symbolist playwrights whose symbolism is markedly different from the symbolism of the French *poètes maudits*; and filmmakers who produce historical dramas which differ from their French and Italian inspirations by alluding to the seed of rebellion that is present in society and dispelling the myth of a tsar. From this perspective, the recreations of these historical moments make this phenomenon less of a paradox and more of an organic manifestation of times when

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<sup>469</sup> Blok, vol. 8 of *Sobranie sochinenii*, 22. Original italics.

medievalism functions as a mode of escape as it deconstructs the past and reshapes collective historical memory.

“[Nikolai II] is about to be struck down,” Winston Churchill would reflect in a manner of a stage director on the sovereign’s abdication years later. “A dark hand, gloved at first in folly, now intervenes. Exit Czar.”<sup>470</sup> The emperor’s abdication prepared the stage for theater of civil war. As it happens, Churchill’s melodramatic language perceptively describes the nation in which theatricality pervades life as it retreats to the past and waits for the next performance of the age that has lost its mystery.

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<sup>470</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis: The Aftermath* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1929), 697.

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