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Masculinities and Anxieties in the Post-Soviet *Boevik* Novel

Introduction: Masculinity, Politics and Soviet Russian *Detektiv* Literature

In a famous and much-lampooned episode from Iulian Semenov's World War Two spy novel *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* (*Seventeen Moments of Spring*, 1968), Soviet intelligence agent Maksim Isaev, who is working undercover in Berlin as SS officer Max Otto von Shtirlits, warns his pregnant radio operator Katia Kozlova (another Soviet agent, living in Nazi Germany under the assumed name Kathe Kien) about the dangers of giving birth.

'You see, women cry out during confinement.'

'Thank you,' commented Kathe with a smile, 'I thought they sang songs.'

Shtirlits shook his head with a sigh. 'You see, my dear, the trouble is they cry out in their mother tongue, in the dialect of the place they were born in. So you'll start screaming "Mama" in your best Ryazan accent...'¹

His fears are realised when she subsequently goes into labour; and after a midwife informs the Gestapo he must draw on all his heroic resourcefulness to rescue Kathe and her infant from the Nazis' clutches, spiriting them off to Switzerland without revealing his own true nature to the enemy.

This episode, in which Kathe is betrayed by her female biological makeup, serves to remind us that there was little place for women within the world of spies and intelligence agents, criminals and police officers that was constructed in Soviet Russian *detektiv* literature.² As Anthony Olcott notes, 'the genre was vir-

¹ Iulian Semenov, *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, translated by Katherine Judelson (New York: Riverrun Press, 1988), 45.

² For most readers the Russian generic designation '*detektiv*' (plural: '*detektivy*') will be familiar; the following explanatory note is directed at those who are encountering the term for the first time. In its broadest sense, '*detektiv*' encompasses those works – both Russian and foreign – that deal with crime and law enforcement. Usually, the crime (which can vary from theft and murder to spying and sabotage) presents a mystery that must be solved by law enforcers such as private detectives, police officers, counter-intelligence agents or so on. However, there are also many *detektivy* in which criminals or vigilantes are the heroes, and sometimes there is no law enforcement at all. *Detektiv* literature unfolds mainly through action and tight plotting rather than portrayals of characters' inner psychological world, thus disqualifying (for example) Fedor Dostoevskii's 1886 novel *Crime and Punishment* from membership.

tually a male domain' throughout the Soviet period,³ dominated by a succession of male authors who created a string of male protagonists to star as their heroes.⁴ Female characters only played minor supporting roles in this overwhelmingly masculine literary endeavour: romantic interests or wives or victims of crime or (like Kathe) assistants to the central male heroes.⁵

Of course, the gendered nature of the literary form was not something widely discussed among critics and commentators. Soviet teachings that the USSR had achieved gender equality – a situation memorably described by Igor Kon as 'official sexlessness'⁶ – meant that such issues could not be raised easily in public, state-mediated discourse. Instead, the critical exegesis focused narrowly on prevailing political teachings. In particular, the central guiding principle for *detektiv* authors and critics was Marxist-Leninist criminology, which from the 1930s onward maintained that crime was a manifestation of class struggle and exploitation. Because antagonistic classes had already been eliminated in the Soviet Union,

³ Anthony Olcott, *Russian Pulp: The Detektiv and the Way of Russian Crime* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 57.

⁴ Some of the more famous authors were Nikolai Shpanov, Lev Ovalov, Arkadii Adamov, Leonid Slovin, Vasilii Ardamatskii, Iulian Semenov, Vil Lipatov, Pavel Shestakov, Arkadii and Georgii Vainer, Nikolai Leonov, Anatolii Bezuglov and Iurii Klarov. Their male heroes included Pavel Chernov, Vladimir Sharapov, Stanislav Tikhonov, Ivan Pronin, Fedor Aniskin, Aleksandr Beletskii, Sergei Korshunov, Igor Mazin, and Nil Kruchinin among others.

⁵ Among the very few exceptions to this rule, author Ol'ga Lavrova stands out for her role in co-authoring the *detektiv* series *Sledstvie vedut znatoki* (*The Experts Conduct an Investigation*), which found great popularity among Russian readers from the 1970s onward and starred female criminologist Zinaida Kibrit alongside police officers Aleksandr Tomin and Pavel Znamenskii. However, her co-author was a man – Aleksandr Lavrov – and Serguei Oushakine notes that Kibrit's 'unusually strong role' (for a woman) in the series was undercut by her primary function 'as a talking supplement to her criminological toolbox, as technical equipment with a human face, able to translate the data she receives into a common language'. Serguei Oushakine, 'Crimes of Substitution: Detection in Late Soviet Society', *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, 432. The novella *Beregis' avtomobilia!* (*Watch Your Automobile!*, 1964), by Emil' Braginskii and El'dar Riazanov, is perhaps the best satire on Soviet Russian *detektiv* literature and offers many valuable insights into its conventions. The following passage on the need for every good literary detective to have an offside highlights the woman's 'proper' place in the genre.

In recent years, young women have started pretending to the role of the detective's close friends. Our modern [Sherlock] Holmeses have beautiful assistants. This is more comfortable than surrounding yourself with the reliable faces of men, as there is no better way for that feeling called love to blossom than through solving a crime together. The harder the crime, the stronger and brighter the love!

Emil' Braginskii and El'dar Riazanov, *Tikhie omuty* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 43–44.

⁶ Igor Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*, translated by James Riordan (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 142.

this left only foreign interference and residual bourgeois mentality as causes for criminality both in Soviet society and in Soviet Russian *detektiv* literature.⁷

The task of the *detektiv* author, then, was to depict ‘the war that our people and government are waging against the very roots of exploitative psychology in all its forms’⁸ – against foreign spies, saboteurs and domestic recidivists, all of whom are motivated by ideologies hostile to socialism.⁹ According to Nikolai Toman’s classic 1960 formulation,

Our *detektiv* literature must not only show how crime is solved but also confirm the Soviet way of life; teach intolerance to any manifestations of the vestiges of capitalism in people’s minds, in everyday life, in economics; [and] provide inspiration for the battle against these vestiges to become a matter for the people as a whole.¹⁰

In doing so, the genre was to be fashioned into a ‘sharp ideological weapon’ for propagating the ideology of State socialism, presenting an ‘effective means of action on the mind and heart of the reader’.¹¹

⁷ Indeed, according to Viktor Miasnikov the only reason that *detektiv* literature survived during the Soviet period was because officials continued to recognise that ‘isolated remnants of the accursed past’ remained and that ‘a prodigious quantity of enemies of the people, hostile agents, and saboteurs’ were being sent into the Soviet Union. Viktor Miasnikov, ‘Bul’varnyi epos,’ *Novyi mir*, no. 11, 2001, 151–152. A 1960 essay by Aleksandr Lavrov and Ol’ga Lavrova highlights the somewhat precarious position that the genre sometimes found itself in because of Marxist-Leninist criminology. They write that many critics have said ‘that there is no reason for literature to depict the battle with criminals. Criminality, they say, is a rapidly disappearing phenomenon, and its final liquidation is a matter only for the relevant Organs.’ Lavrov and Lavrova reject this claim, though, countering that Soviet law enforcers are still battling crime, so ‘society must understand how it is being fought and who the combatants are.’ Aleksandr Lavrov and Ol’ga Lavrova, ‘Bit’ perezhitki metko i naverniaka,’ *O fantastike i prikliucheniiakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1960) 308.

⁸ N. Naumova, ‘Detektiv trebuet vnimaniia,’ *Neva*, no. 7, 1971, 187.

⁹ Vitalii Ozerov summarised Soviet *detektiv* literature’s subject matter as ‘the tense battle with enemies of socialist government’. Vitalii Ozerov, ‘Zhivie liudi ili raskrashennye marionetki?’ *Dlia cheloveka rastushchego*, edited by Vladimir Nikolaev and Lev Razgon (Moscow: Sovetskaia rossiia, 1959) 206.

¹⁰ Nikolai Toman, ‘Chto takoe detektivnaia literatura,’ *O fantastike i prikliucheniiakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1960), 284.

¹¹ Arkadii Adamov, ‘Zarubezhnyi detektiv,’ *Inostrannaia literatura*, no. 10, 1966, 210. Some further important Soviet-era commentaries on *detektiv* literature that expand on the points I have raised here include the following. Arkadii Adamov, ‘“Detektiv” i pravda zhizni,’ *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 1 July 1958, 2; Anatolii Fedorovich Britikov, ‘Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikliuchencheskikh zhanrov,’ *Russkaia sovetskaia povest’ 20–30kh godov*, edited by V. A. Kovalev (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976) 408–453; Mariia Druzina, ‘Detektiv: igra uma ili iskusstvo?,’ *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 1, 1975, 89–93; Svetlana Filiushkina, ‘Detektiv. Nemnogo o zhanre,’ *Podem*, no. 3, 1972, 147–153; Vadim Kovskii, ‘Ia naideius’, chto kniga khoroshaia...’ *Voprosy literatury*, no. 7, 1975, 99–112.

If we extend this understanding of Russian *detektiv* literature into the realm of gender, we could conclude that the forms of masculinity depicted within the genre were constructed in terms of service to the State. The male heroes – who always worked in groups because crime solving was ‘the complex at times dangerous labour of an entire collective’¹² – acted primarily to protect the people and Party, and their very power to perform this function was conferred on them by the State.¹³ They were uniformly steadfast and brave and honest, totally committed to their duty and to the Marxist-Leninist principles upon which this duty is founded. In contrast, criminals were by definition enemies of socialism. Overall, masculinity was organised along (or subsumed by) the political axis of official/dissident, authorised/unauthorised.¹⁴

The post-Soviet Russian *detektiv* revival

The orthodox political orientation of Soviet Russian *detektiv* literature became a tremendous liability when perestroika was ushered in by Mikhail Gorbachev and the truth behind Soviet crime, policing and the intelligence apparatus started to appear. In 1987 critic Viktor Toporov gave voice to the new reality in which the genre found itself, declaring that:

What were until very recently the firm postulates of our ‘native’ [*otechestvennyi*] *detektiv* – the absence of organised crime in our country, for example, and the absolute incorruptibility of all representatives of the law enforcement organs, not to mention other officials – have turned out to be

¹² Adamov, ‘“Detektiv” i pravda zhizni,’ 2.

¹³ It is no accident that private detectives and vigilantes were absent from Soviet Russian *detektiv* literature. The very concept of anyone operating outside government law enforcement agencies was universally dismissed as a bourgeois phenomenon: either they were seen to be defenders of private ownership who pursued rewards and personal glory, or they were understood as a necessary resort for those who could not find justice within the capitalist legal system that supported the exploiting class over the exploited. See for example Vladimir Druzhinin, ‘Chetvero i kniga,’ *O fantastike i prikliucheniakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1960) 227; Tat’iana Kravchenko, ‘Losev. Syshchik i dolgozhitel’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 July 1995, 4; Ianina Markulan, *Zarubezhnyi kinodetektiv* (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1975), 14–17; Ozerov, ‘Zhiviyie liudi ili raskrashennye marionetki?’ 214.

¹⁴ This is consistent with Kevin Moss’s observation that, ‘In East European culture of the Soviet period the major axis of definition that structures thought is not sexual, but political: dissident/pro-Soviet.’ Kevin Moss, ‘The Underground Closet: Political and Sexual Dissidence in East European Culture,’ *Post-Communism and the Body Politic*, edited by Ellen E. Berry (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 229.

merely the fig leaves upon which so many authors hurriedly affixed their signatures.¹⁵

Writers such as Leonid Slovin, Arkadii and Georgii Vainer attempted to rectify the situation in their work, creating new heroes who struggled to fight the crime and corruption perpetrated by their co-workers. Despite their best efforts, though, readers turned away from Russian *detektiv* literature and towards its Western equivalents, which had previously been either banned or heavily controlled. In the first years after the Soviet Union's collapse, books by foreign crime authors such as James Hadley Chase, Arthur Conan Doyle, Ian Fleming, and Agatha Christie grew to account for some 70–80% of all *detektivny* published in Russia.¹⁶ Addressing this situation in 1995, critic Roman Arbitman declared that Russian *detektiv* literature had been 'killed off' by the revelations that emerged during perestroika, and any attempt to resurrect it was 'futile a priori'.¹⁷ Arbitman's prognosis was at the very least somewhat premature, though, as already the signs of an extraordinary turnaround in Russian *detektiv* were visible. Over the next three years, Russian authors took over their foreign counterparts in popularity and sales,¹⁸ and indeed the sudden success of Russian *detektiv* became a much-analysed cultural phenomenon, with critics and commentators putting forward innumerable theories as to why it occurred.¹⁹

¹⁵ Viktor Toporov, 'Pretenzii k poterpevshim', *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 2, 1987, 65–66. On this point see also Geliï Riabov, 'Imenem zakona!' *Sovremennyi sovetskii detektiv*, edited by Geliï Riabov (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), 4.

¹⁶ O. Vronskaia, 'Na podstupakh k "Zolotomu pistoletu"', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 July 1998, 13. Sales figures and other data confirming the popularity of Western *detektiv* literature in Russia at this time can be found in the following sources. Iu. Maisuradze, 'Cheiz na noch': Analiticheskii obzor rynka khudozhestvennoi literatury', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 30 July 1993, 3; Aleksandr Obrizan, 'Moisei starshe Abelia', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 6 August 1993, 21; Iu. Sapozhnikov and N. Timofeeva, 'Rost tsen – ugroza chteniuiu', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 28 August 1992, 8–9. Lina Kalianina notes that practically every major contemporary Russian publishing house established itself during the early 1990s by exploiting this popularity. She writes that 'no particular intuition or intensive market research was necessary: it was enough simply to publish foreign *detektiv*, and returns were assured'. Lina Kalianina, 'Chitateľ' pochityvaet, a pisatel' popisyvaet', *Ekspert*, no. 14, 1999, 27. See also Dmitrii Dymov, 'V poiskakh zhanra', *Ekspert*, no. 11, 2000, 59.

¹⁷ Roman Arbitman, 'Dolgoe proshchanie s serzhantom militsii. Sovremennyi rossiiskii detektiv: izdatel' protiv chitatelia', *Znamia*, no. 7, 1995, 201–202.

¹⁸ See Jeremy Dwyer, 'The *Knizhnoe obozrenie* Bestseller Lists, Russian Reading Habits, and the Development of Russian Literary Culture, 1994–98', *Russian Review*, 66, 2, 2007, 295–315.

¹⁹ The major schools of thought are summarised in Jeremy Dwyer, 'Hegemonic Masculinities and "Men's Business" in Post-Soviet *Detektiv* Fiction,' *Masculinities in Russia Conference*, Russian and East Europe Centre, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 10–14 June 2002.

The post-Soviet Russian *detektiv* revival can be traced back to 1994, when Viktor Dotsenko first started to win a large audience for his series of novels about heroic crime-fighter Savelii Govorkov, who goes by the pseudonym ‘Beshenyi’ (‘The Wild One’). Within two years Dotsenko’s blend of fast-paced action, extreme violence, advanced weaponry and sex was being embraced by millions of readers, and he was identified among the most popular authors in Russia.²⁰ A slew of others adopted his approach, including Danil Koretskii, Sergei Taranov, Vasili Golovachev, Viktor Pronin, and Aleksandr Bushkov, and the so-called ‘*boevik*’ became established as the most prominent *detektiv* sub-genre.

To define the *boevik* concisely is a difficult task. It is more than anything a form of tightly plotted adventure literature that unfolds through action, where the reader focuses on the mystery of ‘what will happen next’. In contrast, the traditional detective story (from which the *detektiv* genre originally borrowed its name) unfolds through solving the mystery of ‘what happened before’ – the causes (the motive and perpetrator) behind a mysterious consequence (a crime). The typical *boevik* novel follows a warrior hero – a ‘hero-in-action’²¹ – who fights evils through superior strength and firepower rather than superior investigative ability.²² Its basic plot involves some villain who plans to commit a large-scale crime or terrorist act and is pursued by the hero, who kills the villain’s minions and

²⁰ ‘Viktor Dotsenko b’et rekordy izdavaemosti’, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 6 August 1996, 6; G. Nezhurin and O. Pogorelova, ‘Esl’i by seichas Khristos vernulsia k nam na zemliu... vriad li on stal by podstavliat’ vragu vtoruiu shcheku’, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 30 July 1996, 10; Igor’ Shevlev, ‘Uspekhi po prozishchy Beshenyi’, *Ogonek*, no. 11, 1996, 68.

²¹ Boris Dubin, ‘Ispytanie na sostoiatel’nost’: k sotsiologicheskoi poetike russkogo romana-boevika’, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 22, 1996, 253.

²² An etymologic analysis offers some illumination here. Up until the late 1980s, the term ‘*boevik*’ had two central meanings: (1) a film, play, literary work, etc that has enjoyed huge success with the general public; and (2) a member of a paramilitary unit, particularly a unit that supported the revolutionaries in the lead-up to the events of 1917. See ‘Boevik,’ *Tolkovyi slovar’ russkogo iazyka*, vol. 1 of 4, edited by Dmitrii Ushakov (Moscow: OGIZ, 1935), 163; ‘Boevik’, *Slovar’ russkogo iazyka*, second edition, vol. 1, edited by Anastasiia Evgen’eva (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1981), 102. The current meaning of the term incorporates both of these in a certain sense: the *boevik* is a best-selling (or at least mass-produced) novel about fighters.

then foils the scheme, destroying the villain in the penultimate scene.²³ Perhaps the closest terminological equivalent in English would be ‘action-thriller’.²⁴

The central feature of the sub-genre that is pertinent for the purposes of this discussion, is its masculine orientation. The *boevik* novels that comprised the first wave of the Russian *detektiv* resurgence were all written by men and about men, thus continuing the gendered pattern that had established during the Soviet period. Furthermore, anecdotal and (limited) empirical evidence on reader tastes suggests strongly that men comprise the core *boevik* readership.²⁵

The *boevik*’s masculine nature was underscored when a second – female – wave of Russian authors emerged to engage with *detektiv*. Aleksandra Marinina led the way, and her series of novels about criminal analyst Nastia Kamenskaia sold in huge quantities between 1996 and 1997.²⁶ After several others followed her success – including Marina Serova, Anna Malysheva, Dar’ia Dontsova, Tat’iana Poliakova, and Polina Dashkova²⁷ – critics moved to distinguish between the ‘traditionally male world of Russian *detektiv*’²⁸ and the newly minted ‘*zhenskii*’ (women’s) *detektiv*.²⁹ The gender distinction also quickly became encoded

²³ I stress that this is a basic descriptive definition, offered purely for the purposes of orientating readers who are unfamiliar with the *boevik*. Boris Dubin’s excellent 1996 study offers a deep analysis of the ‘sociological poetics’ of the Russian *boevik* novel, and is recommended to anyone who wants further information. Dubin, ‘Ispytanie na sostoiatel’nost’’, 252–274.

²⁴ On this point, it can be further illuminating to consider the types of Western works that are classed within the *boevik* sub-genre. These include the Rambo movies and associated books, Tom Clancy’s various political thrillers, and Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels.

²⁵ See Sviatoslav Biriulin, ‘Iz chego sdelana Kamenskaia’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 December 1999, 11; Boris Dubin, ‘The Action Thriller (*Boevik*) in Contemporary Russia’, *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, translated by Stephen Lovell, edited by Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2005), 101; Olcott, *Russian Pulp*, 145.

²⁶ On the rise of Marinina see Biriulin, ‘Iz chego sdelana Kamenskaia’, 11; Jeremy Dwyer, ‘Translator’s Foreword’, *A Confluence of Circumstances*, by Aleksandra Marinina, translated by Jeremy Dwyer, published in *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, vol. 29, no. 1–2, 2002, iv–vi; Iuliia Gnezdilova, ‘Zhenshchina-syshchik? A pochemu by i net!’, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 30 January 1996, 6; Tat’iana Kostygova, ‘Kto na noven’kogo?: Sovremennyi zhenskii detektiv v serii “Russkii best-seller”’, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 5 January 1999, 12.

²⁷ Anna Malysheva likens Marinina to cosmonaut Iurii Gagarin because of the trail she blazed for female Russian *detektiv* authors. Viktoriia Averbukh, ‘“Sploshnoi razvrat” s posleduiushchim razoblacheniem’, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 21 September 2001, 23.

²⁸ Kostygova, ‘Kto na noven’kogo?’ 12. See also Gnezdilova, ‘Zhenshchina-syshchik?’ 6; Oleg Leont’ev, ‘Kak stat’ Agatoi Kristi v Rossii’, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 1 April 1997, 6.

²⁹ The consensus among critics as to the generic specificity of *zhenskii detektiv*, is captured in Tat’iana Kostygova’s assertion that

in the marketing of the two sub-genres. Works of *zhenskii detektiv* appeared in dedicated series with names such as *Detektiv glazami zhenshchiny* (*Detektiv Through a Woman's Eyes*), *Damskie prikoly* (*Ladies' Escapades*), *Detektiv chitaet zhenshchina* (*The Woman Reads Detektiv*) and *Detektiv diva* (*Divas of Detektiv*). At the same time the male-oriented *boevik* novels found an outlet in series including *Muzhskoe delo* (*Men's Business*), *Chest' i sila* (*Honour and Strength*), *Ironicheskii avantiurnyi boevik dlia muzhchin* (*Ironic Adventure Boevik for Men*), and *Spetsnaz GRU* (*Special Forces of the Chief Intelligence Directorate*).³⁰

The *boevik* and the anxiety of reconstructing Russian masculinity

Many other sub-genres comprise the contemporary Russian *detektiv* landscape, some of which can be traced back through the Soviet period and some of which have only recently emerged, but the *boevik* and *zhenskii detektiv* – the first two waves of the post-Soviet Russian *detektiv* revival – are still the most prominent among them. Moreover, they are by far the two most explicitly gendered Russian *detektiv* sub-genres, identified firmly with male and female authors, male and female readers, male and female interests.

This gendered identification – which is so strong that it forms a fundamental element of the generic specificity of the *boevik* and *zhenskii detektiv* – suggests that the two sub-genres can provide insights into the gender issues facing contemporary Russian society. Indeed, an increasing number of scholars are focusing on *zhenskii detektiv* and the way it engages with discourses of femininity, including

Zhenskii detektiv has always avoided vulgarity and obscenity, blunt cruelty, and detailed descriptions of beatings and blood spillage. Its authors are more interested in the psychology of their heroes, the subtle ebbs and flows of feelings and relationships.

Tat'iana Kostygova, 'Poigraem v syshchikov i vorov', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 10 March 1998, 12. Kostygova further writes that *zhenskii detektiv* can be understood as a hybrid between *detektiv*, adventure literature, the romance novel, the psychological novel, and the police novel, where 'the interactions between characters, their personalities, their feelings and passions, [...] interest the writer to a greater degree than the *detektiv* intrigue and traditional unexpected denouement'. Tat'iana Kostygova, 'Monte-Kristo iz VGIKa', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 20 April 1999, 16. For similar commentaries on the nature of *zhenskii detektiv*, see Sergei Mitrofanov, 'Samaia strashnaia skazochnitsa Rossii', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 6 March 1997, 4; Sergei Mitrofanov, 'Strashnye skazki Rossii – 3', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 23 January 1997, 7; Vera Petrova, 'Perekhod kachestva v kolichestvo, ili Kak vazhno byt' nezhadnym', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 5 May 1998, 12; T. Sotnikova, 'Metod, sootvetstvuiushchii kharakteru, ili Kogda tsarit bespredel', *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 26 March 1996, 6.

³⁰ This last series is described by its publisher, EKSMO, as comprising tightly plotted novels 'about real men and for real men'. See <<http://www.eksmo.ru/catalog/rubriks?r=2>>, accessed 14 August 2004.

‘the change in [...] concepts of the woman’s social role’³¹ and the emerging conflict ‘with the conventions and defined roles of patriarchal society’.³² However, I have been unable to identify any similar research that tackles directly the *boevik* and the discourses of masculinity encoded within it.

One of the central issues informing the constructions of masculinity that emerges in early post-Soviet Russian *boevik* literature is the quest to move beyond the discredited official/dissident dichotomy that saw Soviet *detektiv* heroes defined primarily by their service to State socialism. The collapse of the coercive censorship apparatus and the State’s broader retreat from attempting to control many spheres of Russian social, cultural and intellectual life has created a vastly different, more open and more free discursive landscape for *boevik* authors to explore in reconstructing Russian masculinity. At the same time, though, the absence of firm guidelines governing what should replace political affiliation as the organising principle for this reconstructive project appears to have fomented a certain amount of anxiety among the authors, and this anxiety is betrayed in their works.³³

In this essay I present an analysis of Viktor Dotsenko’s Beshenyi series – the series that in many respects sparked Russian engagement with the *boevik* sub-genre and established its major conventions – in order to uncover these processes at work. More specifically, I focus on his central hero Savelii Govorkov: a protagonist who, imbued with all the masculine traits Dotsenko believes are needed for a Russian champion to triumph over evil in the post-Soviet epoch, embodies both the author’s attempt to reconstruct post-Soviet Russian masculinity and the anxieties that emerge from this attempt.

Savelii Govorkov, super man

Most episodes of the series open with a brief introduction in which Dotsenko explains his central hero’s life story for the first-time reader.

³¹ Biriulin, ‘Iz chego sdelana Kamenskaia’, 11.

³² Khartmute Trepper, ‘Filipp Marlou v shelkovykh chulkakh, ili zhenonemavistichestvo v russkom zhenskom detektive?’ *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 40, 1999, 409–410.

³³ This phenomenon can be viewed as a cultural analogue to the social process that Sarah Ashwin has identified: the ‘wide-spread confusion and anxiety regarding the evolution of gender relations in post-Soviet Russia’ that has been brought about by the lack of any ‘clear alternative [gender] model’ to fill the absence left by the withdrawal of the state. Sarah Ashwin, ‘Introduction’, *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, edited by Sarah Ashwin (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

Savelii Kuz'mich Govorkov was born in 1965. At the age of three he became an orphan. Children's home, workers' dormitory, army, *spetsnaz*,³⁴ war in Afghanistan, several wounds. He was wrongly imprisoned, then rehabilitated, headed again of his own volition into the Afghan hellfire, suffered another serious wound [...].

The first book of the series, *Srok dlia Beshenogo* (*Beshenyi's Sentence*, 1994), introduces us to Savelii during the late Soviet period when he has been wrongfully imprisoned for currency speculation. He manages to escape from the prison camp and return to Moscow and avenge himself on the criminals who set him up, in the process clearing his name. Savelii is unable to readjust to 'normal' Soviet life, though, and so in the second book – *Tridtsatogo unichtozhit!* (*Destroy the Thirtieth!* 1994) – he reenlists in the army to return to Afghanistan, where 'everything is clear: there is your enemy, and here is your brother in arms.'³⁵ He is wounded and captured during a fight, escapes his Afghan captors, is found by Tibetan monks and meets the Teacher (*Uchitel'*), who reveals to him the mystic Oriental arts of war. When he finally leaves after five years, the Teacher explains to him that:

[...] your country, the country in which you appeared on this earth, the country which gave you life, which nurtured you – this country is now in trouble and it needs your help!³⁶

Savelii returns to Russia, where he is tricked into training soldiers at a secret criminal base in Kazakhstan (he is led to believe that they are KGB agents) for the August 1991 Putsch, but he discovers the truth and foils the criminals' plans, killing several of them and foiling the coup.

The basic pattern of the Beshenyi series is thus established: Savelii saving Russia from serious threats through his heroic actions. As Boris Dubin writes, 'The starting point, the conceptual core of action [...] is an awareness of disorder in the country.'³⁷ Savelii is driven to put an end to this disorder, to rebuild the great Russian nation that has suffered so much. This task is located firmly in the domain of men – a point made explicit on the back cover of every book found

³⁴ *Spetsnaz*: the Russian Special Forces.

³⁵ Viktor Dotsenko, *Tridtsatogo unichtozhit!* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 33.

³⁶ Dotsenko, *Tridtsatogo unichtozhit!*, 11.

³⁷ Dubin, 'Ispytanie na sostoiatel'nost'', 258.

in the *boevik* series *Muzhskoe delo* (which is produced by Dotsenko's publisher Vagrius and mines the same thematic seams that Dotsenko pioneered):

When the law is powerless they convene their own court. Superdetectives and elite warriors, people simply reduced to despair by criminal disorder. It is their choice. It is *men's business*...

It follows, of course, that all Savelii's foes – from criminals to former KGB agents to corrupt politicians to Chechen warlords to the Secret Order of Masons – are also men. And Savelii's allies who help him to shoulder this weighty burden of protecting Russia are all men too.

The first man to join Savelii's quest is his close friend Major Andrei Voronov, who served with him in Afghanistan and took part in foiling the attempted coup. He quickly finds another ally in FSB General Mikhail Bogomolov, a soldier dedicated to battling crime and corruption. Both are members of the Russian security organs, and frequently contact Savelii when serious situations threaten the country. However, Savelii himself is not actually in their employ, as he never officially rejoins the service of the Russian state after returning from his second mission to Afghanistan. Inverting the gender order that structured male action in Soviet Russian *detektiv* literature, Savelii is an autonomous hero whose authority to perform his heroic duty is derived only from himself, from the duty he feels.

In his autonomous role as a necessary adjunct to the Russian law-enforcement establishment, defending the interests of Russia rather than the interests of the State (though the two do intersect), Savelii possesses far more power than any government representative. For example, when special forces troops fail to rescue the President of Russia's daughter from a hijacked ocean liner in *Voina Beshenogo* (*Beshenyi's War*, 2000), Savelii is asked to deal with the situation. When NATO troops bomb Serbian military positions during the Kosovo conflict in *Pravosudie Beshenogo* (*Beshenyi's Justice*, 1999), Savelii is the only man who can be entrusted to deliver the secret document approving the Russian takeover of Pristina airport, and he leads the convoy of Russian peacekeepers into Kosovo – an operation that he is told 'couldn't have happened without you'.³⁸ When the Russian military need to capture a Chechen warlord in *Okhota Beshenogo* (*Beshenyi's Hunt*, 1999), they bring in Savelii to assemble and lead the team.

³⁸ Viktor Dotsenko, *Pravosudie Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 188.

Savelii stands at the apex of male power in the novels, never relying on anything more than his own abilities, and unbound by anything except the responsibility he feels for his motherland.

It must be noted, though, that Savelii is armed with more than simply superior fighting skills. During the time he spends among the Tibetan monks in *Tridtsatogo unichtozhit'*, the Teacher imparts special powers to him and admits him into a Cosmic Brotherhood of mystical warriors for good, telling him:

For five years I have shared with you my knowledge, developed your spirit and your body. I was not mistaken: you have become one of my most able pupils. Your spirit is stronger and you can now find your own way independently without my help. I've taught you to master your body, and now it is protected from the harmful effects of poisons, fire and steel. Your body can survive a long time without food and water. You know the secret of the sun, of fire, of water and wood. You possess the ability to cure yourself and your close ones.³⁹

He is able to communicate with the Teacher through the Cosmos to seek help when needed, and his powers develop as the series progresses. In short, Savelii is more than a hero: he is a superhero.

The thirteenth book of the series, *Kremlevskoe delo Beshenogo (Beshenyi's Kremlin Case, 2000)*, provides several excellent examples illustrating how Savelii employs his superpowers. Savelii is summoned to meet President Boris Yeltsin, who asks him to investigate the rumours that his inner circle – the so-called Family – are involved in corruption. At the same time, the Secret Order of Masons is plotting a terror campaign. Savelii delivers proof of the corruption to Yeltsin, and then receives a sudden telepathic message from the Teacher informing him that a bomb has been planted in a Moscow hotel. 'Your country needs your help! Now, like never before, dark forces of evil have united to force Russia to its knees.'⁴⁰ Savelii is able to locate the bomb in time and channels mystical energy from the Teacher to defuse it. Meanwhile, Yeltsin has confronted the Family with the proof of their misdeeds and demands they resign. In turn, the Family develop a plan to over-medicate Yeltsin and then have him killed in surgery. Again, Savelii receives a telepathic warning from the Teacher: 'Once more your country is threatened,

³⁹ Dotsenko, *Tridtsatogo unichtozhit'*, 10–11.

⁴⁰ Viktor Dotsenko, *Kremlevskoe delo Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 153–154.

by a danger far worse than the bomb you defused [...]. A plot has been hatched against your President in which doctors are taking part, breaking the first law of medicine – “Do no harm.”⁴¹ Savelii is able to stop the plot and save Yeltsin, who then hands over power to Vladimir Putin so that the war against corruption can continue.

His superhuman abilities are an important tool in Savelii’s struggle; Dotsenko explains that ‘a normal man would not have the strength’ to endure the ‘difficult and dangerous’ path that Savelii has taken.⁴² At the same time, then, these superhuman abilities also represent an important manifestation of the anxiety that accompanies the reconstruction of Russian masculinities in Dotsenko’s novels. For any ‘normal man,’ wielding autonomous power is simply not enough in and of itself to end the post-Soviet disorder and rebuild the Russian nation. Victory ultimately can only be attained through means that do not exist in reality. Dotsenko’s reconstruction of heroic Russian masculinity his *boevik* series is thus removed from the world: Savelii represents the ideal male that Dotsenko believes is needed in contemporary Russia, but his male power is an unattainable fantasy.

A woman’s place

The major role for women in the Beshenyi series is as willing sexual partners for Savelii – a role analogous to that of the female assistants and romantic interests that populated Soviet-era Russian *detektiv*. They find it impossible to resist him, suffering an almost involuntary attraction. When he is lost in the taiga after escaping a prison camp in *Srok dlia Beshenogo*, he loses consciousness and is found by a woman named Varia, who takes him to her cottage to nurse him back to health. She strips the clothes off his limp body to bathe him, and:

[...] she suddenly encountered his inert organ. Feeling a strange desire, she carefully washed it with her cloth and then cleaned it several times more with soap, stroked it, and then suddenly – surprising even herself – bent forward and pressed it to her lips.⁴³

Even with insensible body and flaccid penis, Savelii’s potent Russian manhood is asserted: Varia leans over and whispers, ‘Thank you, my stranger... I haven’t

⁴¹ Dotsenko, *Kremlevskoe delo Beshenogo*, 231.

⁴² Viktor Dotsenko, *Vozvrashchenie Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 78.

⁴³ Viktor Dotsenko, *Srok dlia Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 297.

been with a man for so long.’ His irresistible attraction is also on display in *Voina Beshenogo* when he meets businesswoman Alena. He offers her a massage that arouses her immediately, and she is soon screaming: ‘Enter me! Enter me all the way! Hurt me! Do it now, do you hear!’⁴⁴

At the same time, there is a certain passivity on the part of Savellii in his sexual encounters. He never initiates anything, responding instead to the women’s overtures at every turn. When he meets seductive schoolgirl Larisa in *Liubov’ Beshenogo* (*Beshenyi’s Love*, 1997), for example, ‘she decided immediately that, no matter what happened, he would fuck her today’. She takes him to a hotel room and, when Savellii reaches for the television remote control, she grabs his hand and asks, ‘Have we come here to stare at that box?’ The usual scenes follow as she extracts her pleasure from Savellii, telling him afterward that, ‘It was so great, it was like I’d never been with anyone until I met you!’⁴⁵

On one level, Savellii’s sexual passivity can be understood as an expression of the self-reliant and autonomous Russian masculine ideal that Dotsenko constructs in his hero. Women are naturally and involuntarily attracted to Savellii because he is the prime specimen of mighty Russian manhood, but he is detached from women in the same way that he is detached from the State – he does not need either in order to ‘be a man’. The idea of transcending physical desire and freeing oneself from being a slave to passion is also highly congruent with the Eastern spirituality from which Savellii purportedly draws his superpowers.

However, when we turn to consider Savellii’s relationship with Rozochka, the young woman who becomes his enduring romantic interest, we uncover a somewhat more complex and ambivalent interaction between sex and masculinity. Rozochka has loved Savellii since she was a girl, and in *Liubov’ Beshenogo* she extracts a declaration of love from him, but it is not consummated immediately because Savellii believes she is too young and innocent and ‘must be given the opportunity to learn about herself. To grow up! Otherwise, how could he call himself a man?’⁴⁶ Several scenes ensue in which Rozochka tries to have sex with Savellii but is repulsed. Finally, in book eleven (*Voina Beshenogo*), she meets him

⁴⁴ Viktor Dotsenko, *Voina Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 46.

⁴⁵ See Viktor Dotsenko, *Liubov’ Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 80–84.

⁴⁶ Viktor Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000), 10.

at a New York airport and demands that he do to her ‘what you’ve denied me for so long’, then drags him to a hotel where she immediately takes charge.

Rozochka wrapped her legs around Savelii’s waist, and it seemed that his aroused flesh was about to plunge between her hungry thighs – but Savelii was still unresolved to take the final step: he feared that he would harm her when he broke once and for all her delicate hymen, the symbol of her purity and innocence...

Rozochka herself took this final step. She guided Savelii’s swollen flesh with her hand and thrust sharply to meet it. This thrust was so unexpected for him that he only understood what had happened once he felt himself fully inside his beloved.⁴⁷

Thus the traditional deflowering of the woman by the man is in a sense reversed, with Rozochka using Savelii to penetrate herself.

The sexual passivity that Savelii exhibits with Rozochka cannot be described simply as a symptom of detachment. Throughout the later books of the series we are told repeatedly that he loves her very much and thinks about her all the time. Instead, I would argue that it is submissive: Savelii abandons all autonomous action and initiative once Rozochka corners him in the bedroom. This submissive sexual role is most often associated with women rather than ‘real’ Russian men,⁴⁸ and reveals a further significant aspect of the anxiety that accompanies the new forms of Russian masculinity being articulated in Dotsenko’s novels: profound unease about how male–female relationships are to be reconstructed within the unfamiliar landscape of post-Soviet gender politics. Not sure of how a ‘real man’ should behave in sexual matters, Savelii takes the safest course by becoming a hero-in-inaction.

⁴⁷ Dotsenko, *Voina Beshenogo*, 292–293.

⁴⁸ Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina argue that within the new expressions of Russian male identity, sex ‘is not sexual partnership but rather an instrument for sexual exclusion of the Other. The passivity, the submissiveness of the woman becomes the realisation of the masculine dream.’ Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, ‘Krizis maskulinnosti v pozdnesovetskom diskurse’, *O muzhe(n)stvennosti*, edited by Sergei Ushakin (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002), 451.

Maintaining heterosexuality under suspicious circumstances

More than this, Savelii's copious sexual exploits – which very rarely play any role in the narrative proper – also betray an anxiety about male–male relationships that should be examined more closely.

As we have seen, although Savelii is the focus of the series there are also many other male characters, who form close-knit bonds with one another as they spend time together preparing for and undertaking dangerous missions. These bonds are often manifested in shows of camaraderie such as that found in the following scene from *Tritsatogo unichtozhit'!*, when Savelii unexpectedly meets long-lost friend Andrei Voronov in Afghanistan.

Savelii was the first to snap out of his daze: he stepped out of line and threw himself at the captain. They grasped one another firmly in a manly fashion, and then froze in silent embrace.

The deputy to the company commander, Lieutenant Skvortsov, ordered quietly:

‘Company dismissed!’

The soldiers filed off in a silent and orderly fashion, trying not to interfere with this unexpected meeting of two friends.

‘Good God, how long is it since we’ve seen one another, brother?’ The captain’s eyes immediately became moist. ‘I’d given up hope of ever finding you among the living.’⁴⁹

Often they are extremely intense, to the point that they even eclipse other bonds such as those of family.⁵⁰

With all the male bonding that takes place there is strong potential for reading the Beshenyi novels in the ‘wrong’ way – for ‘misinterpreting’ the manly embraces and joyful tears as expressions of homosexuality rather than camaraderie. Dotsenko himself acknowledges this potential (at least on some level) in a passage from *Ostrov Beshenogo (Beshenyi's Island, 2001)*, where a hired killer named Derek attempts to befriend Savelii by pretending to be on a business trip.

⁴⁹ Dotsenko, *Tritsatogo unichtozhit'!*, 36–37.

⁵⁰ For one illustration of this see the death and funeral of General Porfirii Govorov in Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 203–213. Govorov was a close friend and mentor to many soldiers including Savelii, and so the soldiers themselves take over from the family in arranging the funeral, in grieving and in remembering the departed.

Derek waved a hand. ‘My boss isn’t interested in anything except work, and his assistant is not a personable man. Even with pincers you couldn’t extract a word out of him! So, the fact is that I’m as alone as you are... Perhaps we could unite our respective solitudes?’

‘Maybe this will surprise you but I maintain a traditional orientation!’ said Savelii directly.

‘Good Lord, you thought I was a homosexual?’ Derek laughed heartily. ‘No, I also only love women! I just had a friendly chat in mind. Excuse me if I gave the wrong impression.’

Further to this point, author Baian Shirianov’s recent and now infamous satire on the Beshenyi series, titled *Mogila Beshenogo* (*Beshenyi’s Grave*, 2002), contains several homosexual references.⁵¹ This is important because literary satire must elicit a recognition reaction in its reworking of the target text, implying that the reading audience is aware of Savelii’s potential sexual ambiguity.

By inserting frequent heterosexual sex scenes between the episodes of all-male action and adventure and camaraderie, Dotsenko is seeking to reinforce his hero’s ‘traditional orientation’ in the face of such potential ‘misinterpretations’. The sex scenes are anxious repetitions of the message that Savelii is heterosexual, and their function is to overwhelm any suspicions that might be arousing by the male bonds at the heart of the narrative proper.

This anxious deployment of heterosexual sex to police male–male relationships is illustrated vividly in *Okhota Beshenogo*, in a scene where Savelii’s friends Mikhail Gadaev and Oleg Vishnevetskii meet at a Russian bathhouse to discuss the upcoming Chechen mission. Oleg arrives, undresses and enters the bath area to find Mikhail already waiting for him with two naked women. When one of the women leads Oleg to a sauna and starts to massage him, he explains:

‘Listen, I have to be honest, I don’t want any of this. My wife, whom I love very much, is more than enough for me.’

⁵¹ Baian Shirianov is a pseudonym for author Kirill Vorob’ev, who is well known for gay-themed literary works such as his short story collection *Zanimatel’naia seksopatologiya* (*Amusing Sexual Pathology*, 2002). The front cover of *Mogila Beshenogo* – an obvious parody of the distinctive front covers that identify the Beshenyi series – features a portrait of Viktor Dotsenko’s head placed on the body of a woman in black lingerie, and thus flags Shirianov’s intention to focus on the sexual identity of the hero. Dotsenko and Vagrius publishing house (which is renamed ‘Vaginus’ in Shirianov’s work) launched a highly publicised law suit against Shirianov alleging plagiarism, and Shirianov was pilloried by many critics for the novel.

Oleg attempted to move her away.

‘Don’t be crazy! I’m not trying to take her place. I just want to make you feel good.’⁵²

Oleg acquiesces and the requisite sex scenes follow, then Oleg and Mikhail are free to hold their meeting safe in the knowledge that despite being naked in a bathhouse their sexuality has been put beyond suspicion.

The Other side of Russian masculinity

Dotsenko makes clear that the most important rite of passage marking the transition from boy to man is battle. Savelii’s experience as an *afganets*, a Russian soldier in the Soviet-era Afghanistan conflict, is recounted in a series of flashbacks throughout the series that illustrate its function as his passage into manhood.⁵³ The importance of the baptism under fire is underscored when Savelii rejects a certain Sergei Tepliagov while selecting a team for the upcoming mission to Chechnya in *Okhota Beshenogo*. Tepliagov ‘served two years in Afghanistan, but never took part in any firefight’,⁵⁴ so he is not equipped for the trials that the real men must face in the immediate future.

Many of Savelii’s closest friends and brothers in arms such as Aleksandr Matrosov, Oleg Vishnevetskii and Georgii Mordvintsev – men whom he would trust with his life – are also *afgantsy*. Together they belong to an association of Afghanistan War veterans called Gerat, to which Savelii often turns when he needs extra help in the fight for Russia’s future. In *Okhota Beshenogo*, Bogomolov pays the organisation the following compliment:

‘Ah, if only I had known in eighty-nine what I know now,’ said Bogomolov with bitterness.

‘Then what?’ asked Savelii point-blank.

⁵² Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 155.

⁵³ For some representative examples see Dotsenko, *Srok dlia Beshenogo*, 55–62; Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 16–24.

⁵⁴ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 68. Lynne Attwood too identifies this myth of combat experience and Russian manhood, particularly in her discussion of the film *Chetoby perezhit’ (In Order to Survive)*. See Lynne Attwood, ‘Men, Machine Guns, and the Mafia: Post-Soviet Cinema as a Discourse on Gender’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 18, no. 5/6, 1995, 517.

‘I would have taken these *Afgantsy* and created a special division like OMON⁵⁵ and used it in the fight against organised crime. I’m sure that this crime wave would never have happened.’⁵⁶

Their experience in the most masculine of theatres – the theatre of war – means that they are better equipped than anyone to deal with the current disorder.

However, the fact of being an *afganets* presents limited narrative potential for the Beshenyi series: experience in the Afghanistan War can really only function to reinforce the heroic male biography, because the conflict finished before the Soviet Union’s collapse. Luckily for Dotsenko, though, many new conflicts have flared up in the region during the post-Soviet period, giving Savelii and his friends the opportunity to exhibit and reaffirm their manhood on contemporary fields of battle. Most prominent among these conflicts is the ongoing war in Chechnya, which features in several novels from the Beshenyi series and provides the major setting for the ninth episode, *Okhota Beshenogo*.

This novel opens with General Bogomolov asking Savelii’s help to assassinate an infamous Chechen warlord, arms dealer and criminal named El’san Mushmakaev, who has organised terrorist bombings in Russian cities. Bogomolov cannot draw on his ‘own’ people (FSB agents) for this mission because powerful corrupt forces in Russia are protecting Mushmakaev.

‘Can I ask a question and receive an honest answer?’ asked Savelii, narrowing his eyes.

‘I’ll try,’ replied Bogomolov carefully.

‘Why has this scum remained free for so long? And don’t tell me that it’s impossible to track him down, like they used to say about Dudaev.’

‘Why would say that?’ frowned the General, displeased. ‘[...] Let me explain something: more than once I’ve offered my services, but they told me a categorical “no”.’⁵⁷

Not being subordinate to anybody or anything, Savelii is able to take on this job that Bogomolov and the Russian State cannot. He puts together a team of

⁵⁵ OMON is the Special Forces unit of the Russian Police, an elite group who fight organised crime and perform internal security functions such as riot control and quelling civil and military unrest in regions under Russia’s control.

⁵⁶ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 45.

⁵⁷ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 41.

afgantsy and many firefights and heroic deeds follow as they make their way to Mushmakaev and capture him. These adventures comprise an excellent proving ground for Savelii's masculine power on the field of battle; but more than this, they also afford Dotsenko the opportunity to employ the Chechen man as a foil, an Other against which Russian masculinity can be reconstructed on ethnic grounds.

The Chechen men depicted in *Okhota Beshenogo* are savages and criminals, not freedom fighters and not Islamic crusaders. We are told that when the 1994–1996 Chechen conflict broke out Mushmakaev ‘understood nothing about politics’, but instantly realised that ‘in the rising chaos he could easily live out his wildest dreams’ and ‘become a hero for things that had earlier landed him in jail’.⁵⁸ And his ‘wildest dreams’ for the most part involve raping Russian women. During one raid,

[...] having seen an attractive [Russian] girl of about fourteen, he began to have his way with her in front of her tightly bound mother: he raped her, then inserted a light-bulb into her and shattered the fragile glass. The girl screamed in pain, after which he pushed the barrel of his pistol up her anus and pulled the trigger.⁵⁹

Mushmakaev's gang is called the Mountain Wolves, and every member also enjoys raping Russian women and children before handing them over to Kharon – a Muslim cleric and spiritual guide to the group – to be tortured and killed.⁶⁰ Dotsenko laments at the end of the novel that the Russian mass media too often afford Mushmakaev and his countrymen the chance to air their views while completely ignoring the fact that ‘these Chechen bandits rape children.’⁶¹

In constructing the Chechen Other as a savage rapist, Dotsenko reinforces the inherent superiority of the civilised Russian man. More than this, he employs the accusation of rape in order to brush aside the complex political and historical issues surrounding the Chechen conflict and provide a simple, inarguable justification for the actions of his male heroes: the Russian man must defend the

⁵⁸ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 55.

⁵⁹ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 59.

⁶⁰ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 296, 354. Further to this point, Kharon was chosen as their spiritual leader after they came across him by a roadside and saw the big jar of Russian victims' ears he was carrying. He was chosen because of his savagery, not because of any spiritual guidance he could provide.

⁶¹ Dotsenko, *Okhota Beshenogo*, 365.

Russian woman and child – and ultimately the Russian nation – from the Chechen threat.

However, there is an internal contradiction between these two functions that the Chechen Other performs in Dotsenko's novels: if the Russian male is superior to the Chechen then why hasn't the former prevented the latter from raping Russian women and children? That is to say, Dotsenko employs accusations of rape to demonise the Chechen Other and stand him in opposition to the heroic Russian male, but at the same time the fact of the rapes' occurrence implies that the Russian male has failed in his duty to protect the Russian woman or child. This contradiction is, I would argue, yet another manifestation of the anxiety that emerges from Dotsenko's attempt to reconstruct post-Soviet Russian masculinity in his *boevik* novels: it is an anxiety that emerges from the intersection of several discourses – political, ethnic, gender – that make different demands.

Conclusion

In his series of *boevik* novels, Viktor Dotsenko reconstructs Russian masculinity along very different axes to those employed in Soviet-era *detektiv* literature. Rather than defining an approved form of masculinity through service to the State, Dotsenko's masculine ideal encompasses self-reliance and autonomy, camaraderie, virile heterosexuality, ethnic Russianness. At the same time, I have argued that the novels also betray certain anxieties about these traits: about the limits of autonomous power, about the relationships between men and women, about the suspicions of homosexuality that lurk in the shadow of male camaraderie, and about the threats posed by the ethnic Other.

This leads us to wonder at the ultimate locus of these anxieties. They are certainly not limited to masculinities (or more broadly, gender), but rather cut across several axes along which identity is organised, including sexuality and ethnicity. Perhaps they could best be understood as a manifestation of a more general disorientation following the Soviet Union's collapse, which has left Russians to reconstruct their identities within a shifting discursive landscape that lacks the Soviet 'anchor' of officially approved (and coercively enforced) norms. And Russian *detektiv* in general, as one of the most popular cultural phenomena of the post-Soviet period, is an important forum for this reconstructive project.