



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 26 | Spring 2018

Title	The dissident is dead. Long live the dissident – Boris Akunin and popular literature as counterculture under Putinism
Author	Anne Liebig
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	26
Issue Date	Spring 2018
Publication Date	11/06/2018
Editors	Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo and Valentina P. Aparicio

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The dissident is dead. Long live the dissident – Boris Akunin and popular literature as counterculture under Putinism

Anne Liebig

University of Edinburgh

This paper explores the reappearance of the dissident in Russian contemporary literature following Putin's rise to power, focussing in particular on how the country's formerly highbrow dissident counterculture is now moving closer to the realm of popular culture. Tracing the link between the intelligentsia, literature, and dissent all the way up to the supposed death of all three phenomena in the post-collapse years, this article argues that a dissident revival is not only ongoing, but directly linked to Putin's manipulation of historical consciousness and the nostalgia discourse in Russia. Using Boris Akunin, one of Russia's most popular contemporary writers, as an example, this paper demonstrates how his activity as an author and a public figure has changed in reaction to Putin's totalitarian turn in politics, resulting in an increasingly pointed counter-narrative to the Kremlin's hegemonic discourse on history. Through sketching Akunin's artistic principles as a writer and addressing the importance of the nostalgia discourse for post-Soviet Russia's identity struggles, this article discusses how Akunin's exploration of the intersection between popular culture and highbrow literature may be indicative of a modernisation of the entire Russian intelligentsia tradition, pointing towards the future of literary dissent in Russia.

Over the course of the 20th century, the idea of the Russian writer became near synonymous with that of the Russian dissident. Looking back at the last three decades of the Soviet Union in particular, the two terms entered into a symbiosis that appears in equal measures unnatural and inevitable. Born out of a long tradition of literary dissent that extends all the way back to the forefathers of Russian belles-lettres, the Russian writer became the Soviet became the dissident – a label as dangerous as it was desirable.¹ Spoiled by the unrestrained personal liberty and freedom of speech granted in most Western countries in the post-war period, readers and literary critics alike imbued the Russian dissident with a semi-mystical sheen of red-spangled exoticism: easy to admire while he stayed behind the invisible wall of his more or less hermetically sealed home country, he provided Western readers with a supposedly authentic glimpse into the realities of life behind the Iron Curtain, but without the concomitant threat of ideological coercion.

It may be a truism that the history of Russian dissident literature was written in two parallel narratives, but it is one that warrants repetition (Komarova 7; Woll 1983). Russian fiction of the period 1956-1986 was automatically turned into desirable literary contraband by merit of having been smuggled across the border or circulated in a samizdat edition alone, often with little care or regard for actual authorial intentions.² Among Western audiences, the label “dissident” was liberally applied to any and all writers who dared forego the conventions of Socialist Realism. This was partly the result of

lacking communication with authors inside the Soviet Union, meaning that literary works had to be interpreted according to the only reference frame available, i.e. one often shaped along similarly partisan lines as the best of Soviet propaganda. It was also partly the result of the West's desire to nurture its own narrative of the romantic, unruly, and, above all, anti-Communist writer. For a considerable number of years, politics and literature merged into a single reception frame that did not reflect the reality of many of the Russian writers who were being lauded as the voice of dissidence in the West. Pasternak or Sinyavsky are cases in point, and highlight how an aesthetic distaste for Soviet cultural regulations or even its political system did not always go hand in hand with a readiness to abandon or bedevil the country the Soviet Union had sprung from.³

None of this is to say that dissident literature did not exist – just that Soviet counterculture was a considerably more complex phenomenon than generally suggested. Ann Komaromi, for example, points out that there was more than one kind of dissidence within the Soviet cultural landscape, and that, far from being restricted to a mere support for democratic values, dissident writing could also consider subjects such as religion or the musical subcultures of jazz and rock (76). Likewise, Komaromi stresses the relative insignificance of dissident writers with regard to the political life of the Soviet Union both before and after its collapse: “Dissidents [...] had little or no demonstrated impact on the Soviet regime, during Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika, during the fall of the Soviet regime, or in helping to shape a more democratic and just government after the end of the Soviet Union” (71). The glaring disconnect between the Soviet dissident writer’s position in society and his Western idealised image was further made apparent by the fate of many émigré writers of the third wave, who ended up bereft of a readership on both sides of the Iron Curtain. No longer close enough to the real struggles of the country nor dissident enough to enamour Western readers, they struggled to carve out an intellectual niche on foreign soil.

The term “intellectual” is the third link to be added to the equation of the *volens volens* dissident writer. A common denominator between all Soviet literary dissidents, their affiliation with the world of the intelligentsia secured a connection to higher cultural spheres and functioned as yet another stepping stone towards a positive reputation abroad. Having moved, within a mere half century, from a barely literate population to a country where literature ruled the cultural pantheon of the day, the ability to naysay the supposedly low standards of Soviet cultural policy was celebrated as the expression of a cultivated, even aristocratic, mind-set. This close association between literature, dissent, and the higher echelons of culture also paved the way for the post-collapse debate surrounding the supposed death of the intelligentsia, which was often equated to the death of Russian literature (Marsh 1993). For many, the death of the Soviet writer was an inevitable consequence of the demise of the dissident, who, in the words of Marsh, had fulfilled his “purpose and is now outdated, because [he] still mistakenly [tries] to attach a socio-political significance to literature” (“The Death of Soviet literature” 119). The literature that took over the newly emerging book markets of perestroika and post-collapse Russia had little in common with the elephantine works of old literary grandeur: it was mainly crime fiction, romance and erotica, first in translations from the West and, from the mid-1990s onwards, increasingly in home-grown formats. In the words of Rashmi Doraiswamy: “Perestroika quenched the thirst of the Soviet

people for all kinds of banned and censored literature. Today, it is the turn of popular literature” (309). For many, this sounded the death knell of politically or socially engaged literature in the Russian Federation.

However, this all too easy downgrading of popular fiction does not reflect its actual significance on the post-Soviet book market. Nor is it true that socio-political meaning cannot be found in precisely these newly accessible genres of popular culture. The pliability and quick responsiveness of popular fiction is one of pop culture’s greatest assets, but it is also a powerful tool whose precise reach has not been studied in sufficient detail in a Russian context. This discussion is further complicated by the historical problems connected to the concept of popular culture in Russia. Unlike in Western literature, the word popular did not automatically denote lowbrow cultural products, but it was also not associated with the respectability of highbrow literature. This is attested by the absence of a commonly accepted word for popular culture or fiction up until the 1980s (Lovell “Reading the Russian Popular”³⁰), as well as the fact that official Soviet literature was certainly mass, but hardly ever popular fiction. Stephen Lovell and Rosalind Marsh state, for example, that “Soviet culture was always a bizarre (to a Western understanding) mixture of high and low” (“Culture and Crisis” 77), but this assertion could easily be extended to include 19th century Russian culture as well. Even the term mass culture is fraught with conflict in a Russian context: “In Russia the term *massovaia kul’tura* was not applied to the Soviet Union – it was regarded as a phenomenon specific to Western capitalist societies, which Soviet society [...] had managed to avoid” (Lovell “Reading the Russian Popular”¹⁹). Consequently, the truly popular was often subversive in nature, but marked by limited availability and by no means lowly origins. Svetlana Boym introduced the term “countermemory” for this reading and writing subculture, which she used to describe “not merely a collection of alternative facts and texts but also an alternative way of reading by using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, private intonation that challenged the official bureaucratic and political discourse” (62). It is this very exceptional position that literary intellectuals and readers from Soviet times found hard to let go of in post-collapse Russia, where their cultural sovereignty and authority were suddenly challenged by a much less discriminate, and considerably less erudite, commercial publishing industry. The Russian reader was not used to associating mass print-runs with readability, or seeing herself as a consumer. Against the backdrop of 1990s commercialisation processes, however, this was exactly what she was destined to become. The identity issues that this produced, and which were, in turn, predominantly negotiated in popular fiction, find an exemplary outlet in the protagonist’s struggles in Viktor Pelevin’s *Generation P*, where

[the] Russian *intelligent’s* anxiety about diminishing cultural capital in a world dominated by currency is demonstrated not only by Tatarskii’s lowly status as a mid-level copywriter in several ad agencies, but – more significantly – by his inability to produce what has traditionally been associated with Russian authors: namely, a cosmic, life-transforming ideal (Livers 481).

Somewhat ironically, the intelligentsia’s survival is thus historically conditioned by and dependent on the existence of a strong, if not outright repressive, state. This prerogative was no longer a given in the chaotic, but comparatively liberal years of the 1990s, and popular culture in a Western sense of the word flourished. Perhaps this explains why, when such issues as the representation of history in fiction were suddenly delivered into the hands of an unsuspecting public, the transition was met with roughly equal

amounts of delight and chagrin. An inborn wariness of the commercial book market alongside a projection of “the Soviet regime’s extreme hostility to commercially successful, entertainment-orientated popular literature” (Lovell “Literature and Entertainment in Russia” 26) factored heavily in the many disparaging comments aimed at popular literature by Russian literary scholars and critics of the time, who, as summarised by Birgit Menzel, were united in “the verdict that popular so-called mass fiction ruled the post-Soviet literary field [... as did] the pointed refusal to deal with the reading material of choice for 90% of the population” (“dem Urteil, daß populäre sogenannte Masseliteratur das postsowjetische literarische Feld beherrscht [... sowie] der demonstrativen Weigerung, sich mit dem zu beschäftigen, was etwa 90% der lesenden Bevölkerung als Lesestoff wählen”; *my translation*, 219). Thus, neither a recognition of nor an academic discourse on the phenomenon of popular fiction was encouraged.

Nevertheless, the process, once started, could not be stopped, and it acquired increasing momentum in the context of a search for a viable national identity. Literary dissidents had been transplanted into a world without rules to strain against, and while the immediate post-Soviet culture industry was certainly “hell-bent on creating [an] impression of chaos while the 1990s were still a going concern” (Borenstein 87), it did not overly concern itself with political leadership. Questions of national identity, economic survival and cultural self-determinacy ruled the day, not Yeltsin’s drunken antics. The chaos of the 1990s, so fittingly subsumed under the Russian term *bespredel*, raised one fundamental question: had the Russian *intelligent* died out, and, by doing so, taken Russian literature with him?

Taken against the updated backdrop of contemporary post-Soviet Russia, it can be argued that the Russian dissident had not died, but descended into a period of well-deserved hibernation. Russian literature had not been sent to an early grave either, but its previous status in society became subject to renegotiation. By the early 2000s, the prolonged political indeterminacy so characteristic of the Yeltsin years had given way to new, once again politically determined tendencies in post-Soviet literature. One of these movements was the neo-imperialist turn, embodied in the works of Prokhanov and other writers of a similarly aggressively nostalgic mind-set, who aimed to “construct cultural continuities in response to social chaos and historical breaks, and [...] frantically insist on Russia’s identitarian distinctiveness” (Noordenbos 106). Novels such as *Gospodin Geksogen* (2002) were part of a conspiracy theory boom in the nationalist camp that constituted the very opposite of a dissident counterculture, and which instead helped the rise of Russia’s 21st century Tsar: Vladimir Putin.

Since Putin’s rise to power on 31 December 1999, the political dissident streak in Russian literature has started to wake from its democratically induced slumber. Both Putin and his predecessors recognised the need for a usable version of the Russian past and concomitant identity narrative in order to strengthen ties between politics and the people. To meet this need, Putin, unlike his predecessors, identified nostalgia as one of most viable ideological tools available. His preoccupation with rehabilitating both the Imperial and the Soviet past for a post-Soviet usability has been commented upon by a multitude of scholars. Evgeny Dobrenko, for example, argues that Putin removed the “post-”

from the post-Soviet era, and instead facilitated a modernisation of Soviet culture that transplants its tenets and ideals right onto a 21st century context (Dobrenko 2011). For a study of Russia's most recent political counterculture, this argument holds a lot of sway. By expounding on his KGB history, devising a clever PR strategy (complete with bare-chested horseback riding, martial arts photoshoots, and public puppy cuddling), and presenting himself as the diametrical opposite to the feeble, indecisive alcoholic Yeltsin, Putin has successfully reactivated the old operating modes of personality cults and fashioned a regime best termed "Stalin light", if not "Stalin medium" (Petrov 96f). The increasingly apparent clamp-down on freedom of speech in media and print, for example, is reflected in the rise of self-censorship among journalists and writers alike, allowing for an extension of McDaniel's claim about "the pervasiveness of double-think, of dual consciousness" (89) in both Imperial and Soviet times to the post-Soviet era as well.

The reason nostalgia is at the centre of a discussion of counterculture under Putinism is that it carries an inherent "capacity to provide self-definition and to facilitate [the] establishment of a new identity" (Lee 161), which was (and arguably still is) one of the main concerns of the post-Soviet period. The post-Soviet nostalgic discourse sprang to life almost directly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, defying first the by then traditional attempt by leading perestroika politicians to relegate the memory of their predecessors to oblivion, and later the supposed after-effects of a traumatic shock disorder (Noordenbos 2016).⁴ Far from proceeding in a linear fashion, post-Soviet nostalgia evolved in two distinct periods: the 1990s, when nostalgia was still a popular impulse on the level of society and linked to a public exploration of the hidden corners of Russia's past, and the 2000s, the time when it was commodified as a tool in service of Putin's totalitarian turn in politics. The nostalgic discourse of the 1990s was, in Moonyoung Lee's words, a "genuinely popular *impulse* [emphasis added]" (172): a spontaneous and largely unorganised process generally characterised by its intensity, but also its brevity, and focused mainly, though not exclusively, on pre-revolutionary times. From today's perspective, it is impossible to predict how the 90s nostalgic discourse might have developed had different political changes occurred after the year 2000, but there is a distinct possibility that nostalgia could have ran its course and simply ceased to play a part in the national identity discourse.

Instead of disappearing from the cultural landscape of post-Soviet Russia, however, "after the end of the 1990s, [nostalgia] acquired its dynamic force from the 'outside.' It is noteworthy that this 'outside' is neither a mature civil society nor the intelligentsia, [...] but political power itself" (Lee 172). By lifting the shroud from select patches of Russian history that had either remained taboo or been deliberately ignored during the 1990s, Putin managed to establish a continuous timeline upon which to build the narrative of a cohesive nation and claim the interpretative primacy for all of Russia's history. Given his predecessors' habit of denying history to the people, it was not a hard monopoly to win. Through careful manipulation of historical memory – for example via the introduction of a single, state-approved history textbook for schools; the return of Stalin memorial plaques, statues and busts in official institutions, and the resurrection of Russia's war myth complete with its own memory law (Koposov 2018) – Putin managed to turn nostalgia into a widely accessible good, as well as a state ideology.⁵ His one-sided offer of nostalgia-on-demand bears the appearance of being holistic and

inclusive of a socio-political yearning for both the Soviet and the Tsarist years, but actually excludes the long tradition of critical intelligentsia thought and, indeed, literary dissent characteristic of these periods. In official discourse, the 19th century is remembered, but only through the faces of the Imperial family and their newly acquired Orthodox martyr status, not the thinkers, writers, and artists that carried a very different vision for the country; the Soviet era is commemorated, but only in martial terms of warfare and Stalinist adulation, hardly ever in its dissident heritage or everyday culture.

The commodification of nostalgia works both ways, however, and representations of Russian history in popular culture are increasingly aimed at a dismantling of the Kremlin's master narrative, while others work to corroborate it. In respect of the ties between Russian popular fiction and nostalgia, Lee asserts that "[n]ostalgia in contemporary Russia is represented and circulated most actively in the pop culture industry" (165), while Adele Barker sees "popular culture in Russia today [as] heavily nostalgic" (19). Svetlana Boym, one of the most relevant voices within the contemporary discourse on nostalgia, registered that in Russia, "sometime in the mid-1990s [...], the word *old* became popular and commercially viable, promoting more goods than the word *new*" (65). It is this shift in paradigm that is important to stress, and this very blend of high and low culture – of addressing Russia's eternal questions from a pop culture perspective that shows a shrewd merging of commercial awareness, postmodernist aesthetics, and intelligentsia traditions – that has the potential to continue the tradition of literary political counterculture in a Russian 21st century context.

A suitable case study for this hypothesis is provided in the work of Boris Akunin, the man who helped Russian detective fiction on its dizzying ascent to the pinnacle of popular fiction from 1998 onwards. The success of his flagship project, the Erast Fandorin series, not only serves as an example for the way in which popular and high culture intersect to form a new platform for literary dissent, but also reactivates a similar pre-Soviet cultural phenomenon: "Like Dostoevsky who used the form of the boulevard novel and the crime novel to raise complex ethical and philosophical questions, Akunin's detective novels occupy a special place in this pantheon of popular writers" (Doraiswamy 210). Fittingly, Akunin chose the subtitle "новый детектив/*new detektiv*" for his series, combining an archaic, 19th century spelling of the Russian word for detective novel with the contrasting adjective new. There is, indeed, a lot that is new about Akunin's approach to popular fiction: classical-experimental in style, conservative-progressive in content, Akunin celebrates the postmodern mind-set in a genre that many believed could no longer harbour any surprises. Having chosen one of the major eras for Putinist nostalgic myth-making as the backdrop for his work, i.e. the late Imperial period, he is also working to de- and reconstruct official narratives of statehood, history, and self, thereby challenging the Kremlin's hegemony on historical interpretation. As his master sleuth tackles and devaluates state-sponsored views on the topics of Empire, national identity, the Tsar as father figure, and Russia's position between East and West, Akunin not only unveils some of contemporary Russia's most pressing nostalgia issues, but also invites his readers to participate in a discussion of these.

Over the course of the last ten years, Akunin has made active use of social media platforms to position himself as a writer of intellectual and politically engaged popular fiction. Akunin has used these

platforms to chronicle his writing progress, involving readers not just in plot developments, but also more general discussions on Russian life and politics. In 2010, he started a blog on the platform LiveJournal, whose contents he described as “entertaining near-historical tales; a few socio-political things; news about my literary work” (“развлекательные околоисторические байки; что-то общественно-политическое; новости про мою литературную работу”; *my translation*, “Как у провел лето”). Following LiveJournal’s move to Russian servers in 2016 and the subsequent change to restrictive Russian terms of service, Akunin quit the platform in April 2017 in an expression of political protest.⁶ Previously, he had used it to comment on various political incidents, most prominently the cases of Khodorkovsky and Navalny. Talking about the former, Akunin called for an “amputinatsiya”⁷ as the most effective solution to the issue (“ампутинация”, “Pochtovaya sumka”) and called Khodorkovsky’s development from “the master of his own rich Russian company” to “the master of his own fate [...] a high rise in career” (“хозяин самой богатой российской компании [...] хозяин своей судьбы [...] высокий карьерный взлет”; *my translation*, “Problema vybora”), whereas his evaluation of Navalny wavered over the years, but was largely supportive in 2017 (“Pro natsionalnuyu ideyu”).

Akunin also used his LiveJournal as a general discussion platform of Putin’s politics, and became one of the leading faces of the public opposition movement that took to the streets in 2011. In order to do so, he stopped working on his book projects and relocated from France to Russia in December 2011 (“Ne usidel”). He used his blog extensively as a platform for political agitation as well as a tool to gauge and discuss the political views of his readers. As he himself noted, this led to a changed perception of his status as a writer in Russia, and brought him into contact with widespread criticism for the first time in his career:

For the first time in my literary career I acquired an impressive anti-rating. Whereas people used to have either neutral or positive opinions about me, and the proportion of people who did not wish me well was kept to a minimum, now my involvement in social matters has earned me the dislike of ardent Putinists on the one hand (for “rocking the boat”), and ardent revolutionists on the other (for diffidence and sycophancy). [my translation] (Akunin, “Kto s vami, mastera kul’tury?”⁸).

The annexation of Crimea proved a turning point for Akunin, and after years of averring that he would not leave Russia, he emigrated to France in 2014. So far, he has not returned to Russia. When asked about his relationship to the country in an interview in 2017, he stated:

I write my “letters” to Russia—books. And I receive answers, via Facebook or comments on my blog. It’s hate mail, mostly. Like, *Stop reviling our great Motherland, you bloody Russophobe*. So, I guess, the separation is likely to continue for a while longer (Edel).

Before Akunin turned detective writer-cum-political activist, however, he primarily received critics’ attention for his literary works, and not his political views. Appearing as somewhat of a cultural sensation for some, but certainly as a novelty for most post-Soviet readers, he initially garnered positive appraisals for the *Fandorin* series both within and without Russia. After his emergence on the English-speaking book market, which occurred with a five-year delay (the first translation of *The Winter Queen* was published in 2003), Western critics started to take a particular liking to the Russian crime fiction wildcard on their shelves. Akunin has been called the “Russian, anti-Putin version of J.K. Rowling”

(Cathcart “Kak avtor Boris Akunin”), “Russia’s best-known author of historical fiction—and, quite probably, its best-known popular writer *tout court*” (Frede Lovell and Werth 234), “the man credited with having created a new genre of Russian literature” (Myers “A Russian Intellectual”), and “without doubt the most interesting phenomenon in Russia’s contemporary literary marketplace” (Leon 149). Because of the delay in publication, however, it is not always clear, whether Western appraisals of Akunin’s work stem from his role as a writer or a political activist. Several journalists have betrayed a Eurocentric bias in interviewing him, by inferring, for example, that Akunin is “a somewhat singular Russian by arriving perfectly on time at the Mari Vanna restaurant in London’s Knightsbridge [...] hardly someone likely to shake the Kremlin’s walls and provoke the wrath of President Vladimir Putin” (Thornhill “Lunch with the FT”). Likewise, Akunin’s phenomenal success in his home country – the *Fandorin* series has reportedly sold more than 18 million copies on the Russian book market alone – has been commented upon as “startling, since none of his books contains the ingredients said to be the *sine qua non* of popularity in a post-authoritarian, post-censorship literary market” (Leon 149). In other words, no writer with a mind-set as critical as Akunin’s ought to have generated this kind of literary success in Russia. The suggestion that only Western readers can properly value the subversive qualities of his work points to a reactivation of former reception frames for Russian literature that should by now be outdated.

Despite their ideological bias, Western critics are not entirely wrong in their approach to Akunin’s work. He did, for example, make his dissident intentions clear in his choice of pseudonym, which has sparked multiple discussions over the years. The name Akunin appears Russian enough at first glance, but carries a low-level exoticism that invites attention to wordplay, with the two dominant approaches for interpretation focussing on the Russian vs. the Japanese roots of the name. This can be taken as a hint towards the transculturalism of the Russian dissident tradition, but it also places the author and his work on the very same spectrum of multi-ethnic identity construction that he investigates in his novels.⁹ On the one hand, the combination of the initial B. with the surname Akunin conjures up the image of the 19th century anarchist Bakunin, a suggestion that Akunin has openly accepted with reference to his origins as a writer: “[t]he style I used at the beginning was anarchistic. Russian literature was either very high or low. I mixed literature with entertainment” (Thornhill “Lunch with the FT”). In another interview, he added that “he toyed with taking the name of Molotov [so as to be able to describe his books as a cocktail], ‘but Molotov is such a disgusting character that I preferred Bakunin’” (Rees “The Masked Man”). Approaching his name from the Japanese tradition, a cultural sphere that Akunin is professionally comfortable in, *akunin* can also mean “evil doer” or “evil person”, and the term is used to describe “lowly and disruptive elements in society who did not submissively conform to communal norms and the established social order” (Dobbin 101). By taking the image of a political anarchist and giving it a literary spin, Akunin offers not only an underhanded commentary on the often involuntarily political role of writers in the country that he grew up in, but also refers to a continuation of the Russian dissident tradition, both in its literary and political sense. Indeed, Akunin’s participation in this tradition was deemed by some to have gone too far; following the publication of the *Fandorin* novel *Ves’ mir teatr* in 2011, he had to deal with a lawsuit against his publisher *Zakharov* for the allegedly extremist statements contained in the book. True to the unruly nature of his literary

persona, Akunin quipped about his “criminal activity [...] coming to an end, it seems” (“[н]у всё, моей преступной деятельности, кажется, наступает конец”; *my translation*, “Ekstremizm ne proidët”), and did not fail to point out the rather blatant official attempts at covering up the incident (“Ето byl samosvanets!”).

As described above, Akunin’s involvement in the politics of his country has heightened his profile among Western readers, but it has also had some detrimental effects on his popularity ratings as a writer within his own country. One Russian critic described Akunin’s work as the kind of literary phenomenon that, by “overstepping the narrow borders of literary science, [turns] out to be something more terrifying – either the symptom of some long-standing illness, or the diagnosis of the contemporary mind-set” (“перехлестывает узкие литературоведческие рамки, являясь чем-то более страшноватым – не то симптомом какой-то давней болезни, не то диагнозом сегодняшнего состояния умов”; *my translation*, Shcheglova 72-73). True to the Russian paradigm of fashioning derogatory terms out of surnames, the terms “akuninshchina” (“акунинщина”, Lugarich 71) and “Akuninisation of the whole country” (“акунизации всей страны”, Komarova 71) have cropped up. If Shcheglova’s “long-standing illness” refers to the infiltration of post-Soviet Russia with the sort of historico-political outlook that refuses to adhere to official notions of the past and challenges the brittle border between high and low culture, then she is not wrong. However, it should also be remembered that Akunin’s appearance on the literary stage dates back to 1998, long before the name Putin held any kind of sway within post-Soviet politics. No appraisal of Akunin as a dissident writer should lose sight of this fact, and whereas Russian (d)evaluations of his work – such as those presented above – appear to be aware of this, their Western counterparts tend to be less discerning, viewing him as simply an anti-Putin writer. This is not to say that Russian critics’ attacks have not also become inspired by the (now increasingly obvious) political implications of Akunin’s work, sometimes failing to make clear whether their criticism stems from Akunin’s position as an exile writer, a simple dislike of his style, or a belated protectiveness of the culturally elevated dissident reputation.

The fact that Akunin does represent a new form of counterculture is, however, no longer deniable. For now, he is just one example of the way the former intelligentsia is exploring new ways of protest and modernisation. He is, however, a particularly evocative example, because he embodies the fluidity of the concept of dissidence in full measure, and skips casually between his disregard for both cultural conventions and political leadership, thus inviting an equally casual classification of himself as a dissident. Moreover, his development from a purely literary to a predominantly political *enfant terrible* serves as evidence for how the reawakening of a politically subversive mind-set in Russian society is the direct result of Putin’s rise to power, while at the same time being indicative of a modernisation process within the wider dissident tradition and a willingness to embrace the laws of the market to make their voices heard. It remains to be seen to what extent Akunin’s particular blending of popular and high culture is going to be representative of this new form of post-Soviet dissidence, or where political counterculture is going to take Russian literature in the years to come. Given the widespread appearance of other subversive movements on the Runet and social media channels,

however, it stands to reason that the future of post-Soviet dissidence will have to keep one foot firmly in the popular culture camp.

¹ Both Pushkin and Lermontov, whose works are generally considered the beginning of the Russian novel, served time in political exile in the Caucasus.

² Likewise, all Soviet literature that was published with official approval was considered second-rate at best, which is a misconception that still holds to the present day.

³ Boris Pasternak had to rescind his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1958 for his novel *Doctor Zhivago* once the award caused a public scandal and led to his expulsion from the Soviet Writers Union. Likewise, Andrey Sinyavsky is often considered a political dissident writer par excellence by Western critics, but has made it clear throughout his oeuvre that he was writing against restrictions in the arts and freedom of speech, not the political system itself. Neither author ever called himself a dissident in a political sense.

⁴ I would like to argue that this discourse deserves a more critical analysis with the temporal distance available to researchers now. Trauma as the ultimate identity conflict of the 1990s has grown into an overarching master-narrative that borders on a somewhat shaky, and potentially unsound, commonplace. Consequently, it should be seen not so much as a source than as a precursor to the equally weighty nostalgia discourse.

⁵ The law forbids the dissemination of false information on the role of the USSR in World War II and is unique among international memory laws in that it criminalises the memory of the survivors, rather than that of the perpetrators (in this case, the Soviet government).

⁶ Given his large readership and his often scathing commentary on Russian politics, a ban from the platform for “political solicitation” would have probably been imminent.

⁷ This can be read as a wordplay on “amputation” and “Putin”, suggesting that the organism of the Russian state can only be healed – or, indeed, allowed to survive – under the condition that Putin is removed from it.

⁸ “Впервые за свою писательскую карьеру я обзавелся внушительным антирейтингом. Если раньше люди относились ко мне либо безразлично, либо одобрительно, а пропорция недоброжелателей была минимальной, то своей общественной активностью я снискал неприязнь, с одной стороны, пламенных путинистов (за «раскачивание лодки»), с другой – пламенных революционеров (за робость и соглашательство).

⁹ Akunin’s detective figure, Erast Fandorin, spends many years in Japan and adopts several Asian mannerisms.

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Author Biography

Anne Liebig is an alumna of Heidelberg University and a 2nd year PhD student in Russian Literature at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include post-Soviet crime fiction, nostalgia studies, and the relationship between politics and literature. She has participated in conferences in Austria, Bulgaria, and the UK and has published several book reviews.