

*Ilya Kukulin*

## **Torn Consciousness: Ilya Selvinsky, Yan Satunovsky and Uncensored Literature as a Deconstruction of the Soviet ‘Covenant with History’**

**Abstract:** This article examines the correspondence between Yan Satunovsky and Ilya Selvinsky, a rare example of systematic and long-term contact between a representative of uncensored poetry and a major, established Soviet poet (though Selvinsky sometimes wrote ‘for the desk drawer’ works that were unacceptable to Soviet censorship). While Selvinsky responded generally favourably to Satunovsky’s children’s poems, he reviewed the latter’s adult poems (now considered classics of uncensored Russian-language literature) negatively and wrote that they demonstrated a “dis-integrated consciousness” (literally: “torn consciousness”). This article clarifies the context and significance of this formulation, which was important to the polemical strategy of literary Constructivism, the movement that Selvinsky headed in the 1920s. Furthermore, the unexpected clash between Selvinsky and Satunovsky demonstrates the incompatibility of two versions of Soviet modernist poetry: teleological and anti-teleological. The former was fundamental to poetry that adhered to official aesthetic and political guidelines, the latter to uncensored poetry.

**Keywords:** Soviet literary Constructivism, uncensored poetry, literary generations, crisis of the Soviet utopian project

### **1. Ilya Selvinsky and the young poets of the ‘Thaw’**

Compared to other poets who came to the forefront of Russian literature in the 1910s–1920s, Ilya Selvinsky (1899–1968) was perhaps most committed to mentoring young poets. He ran a literary studio, taught at the Gorky Literary Institute, a unique institution designed to train professional Soviet writers,

and in 1939–1940 created an association of young Moscow poets who sought to combine modernist aesthetics with communist belief in its Stalinist variant: the Brigade of Poets at the Goslitizdat literary consultancy (Kukulin 2025). As far as we can tell, Selvinsky was highly respected among literary youth in the 1930s. Nevertheless, immediately after the end of World War II, Selvinsky's relationship with his former students (David Samoilov, Boris Slutsky) began rapidly to dissolve. In the 1950s, Selvinsky was losing the battle for influence on the minds of the younger generation of poets to Boris Pasternak, whom he had admired for many years and at the same time perceived as a rival. (Later, during the 'Pasternak affair', Selvinsky attacked his former friend in the press, which led him to catastrophic reputational loss.)<sup>1</sup>

Selvinsky's failure is recounted in Lev Losev's memoir *Meander*, which describes a January 1956 trip to Moscow by three young Leningrad poets (Leonid Vinogradov, Mikhail Eremin, and Aleksei Lifshits, later known as Lev Losev), who became central figures of the so-called 'Philological school' and, more broadly, of uncensored Russian-language poetry. They visited Boris Pasternak and Ilya Selvinsky in turn. Pasternak received the poets but refused to read or listen to either their poems or those of their friend Vladimir Ufliand, and instead spoke to them for more than two hours about his views on Soviet history and contemporary Soviet literature and cinema. Selvinsky, on the other hand, asked them to read poems and particularly singled out Lifshits. Still, the conversation with him disappointed the Leningrad guests: «Выйдя из лаврушинского дома, мы сошлись во мнении, что Сельвинский неумен»<sup>2</sup> (Losev 2010: 249). Losev emphasizes that he held Selvinsky's poems of the 1920s in high regard even in his mature years, but he believed that Selvinsky later lost his ability to think independently under the influence of the Soviet regime: «Потенциально Сельвинский мог стать кем-то вроде

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1 The Pasternak Affair was a campaign of fierce persecution of Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) in the Soviet press and attacks in speeches by literary and party officials. It followed the publication of Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* in Italy (1957) and Pasternak's award of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1958). According to Kirill Koval'dzhi memoirs, Selvinsky came to the dying Pasternak in 1960, begged his forgiveness on his knees, and was forgiven. However, if this is true, this event was known to a rather narrow circle of people (Koval'dzhi, Kirill: "Eshche o Selvinskom", <https://web.archive.org/web/20211112184150/https://www.vilavi.ru/raz/alisa/4.shtml>, 16.02.2025).

2 "Leaving the house at Lavrushinsky lane, we agreed that Selvinsky was unintelligent". Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine. – I. K.

Брехта, но не стал ничем. Он думал, что его сдавливают и несет могучий поток истории, а его, как и многих других, просто придавили и растерли кирзовым сапогом»<sup>3</sup> (Ibid.: 248–249).

Losev's memoir demonstrates that for authors of uncensored poetry, which in the 1950s was gradually turning into an autonomous subfield of literature,<sup>4</sup> the figure of Ilya Selvinsky was both attractive and disappointing. In this article I show that both the desire to gain Selvinsky's approval and the disappointment in him were manifestations of general trends in the evolution of Russian poetry, and not just a fact of the personal biographies of Eremin, Vinogradov, and Losev. A similar path was travelled by Satunovsky, an author different from the young poets of the 'Philological school' in both generational self-definition and aesthetic orientation.

A common reason for this disillusionment could be the political and aesthetic position of Selvinsky, who in the 1950s was perceived as a much greater conformist than Pasternak – and more than Selvinsky himself had been in the 1920s with his striking experiments. However, in my opinion, this was far from being just the “capitulation” that Losev frankly wrote about. Back in the 1920s, when Selvinsky made his major poetic discoveries, he developed – in collaboration with other Constructivists – his own conception of poetry, which he would defend throughout his life. It was this conception that prevented him from understanding not only the individual authors of the new, independent post-Stalin Soviet culture, but this culture as a whole, and this refusal to understand was reciprocated by his younger interlocutors. The purpose of this article is to analyze this mutual misunderstanding through one particular example.

## 2. Yan Satunovsky and Ilya Selvinsky: a failed dialogue

Satunovsky's relations with the Constructivists in general and Selvinsky in particular have been the subject of special studies by Oleg Burkov (2012) and Kirill Korchagin (2021). In his biographical essay on Satunovsky, Burkov writes

3 “Potentially Selvinsky could have become something like Brecht, but he became nothing. He thought that he was squeezed and carried by the mighty stream of history, but he, like many others, was simply pressed down and crushed with a kirza [army] boot”.

4 For more on this formation, see: Kukulin 2019.

that in the late 1930s Satunovsky asked his brother Piotr, who lived in Moscow, to show his poems to Selvinsky. Selvinsky, who was considered a *maître* at the time, assessed Satunovsky's works with some skepticism. However, it seems that Satunovsky's association with Selvinsky dates to a much earlier time, when he might have participated in some activities of the Literary Center of Constructivists (LTsK), which Selvinsky headed in 1924–1930. On October 21, 1966, Satunovsky wrote the poem "*Pomniu LTsK – literaturnyi tsentr konstruktivistov...*" ("I remember LCC – the literary center of the Constructivists..."; [201]), from which Burkov assumed that during his studies in Moscow in the late 1920s, the young Satunovsky was close to the 'konstromoltsy' (Constructivist Youth members), who gathered in the literary studio of Krasnoe studentchestvo (Red Studenthood) under the leadership of Selvinsky.

An important piece of indirect evidence can supplement this assumption. In his poems and commentaries, Satunovsky repeatedly mentions the poets Georgy Obolduev and Ivan Pul'kin, with whom he was well acquainted. In 1930, Satunovsky and Obolduev went to Vladimir Mayakovsky's funeral together, and Satunovsky mentions this in one of the versions of his poem "*Ta byl iz tekh, zatertykh v tolpe...*" ("I was among those pressed in the crowd..."; [719]). Obolduev and Pul'kin were members of the Union of the Approximately Equal (*Soiuz Priblizitel'no Ravnykh*), an informal group that emerged within the Literary Center of Constructivists but was opposed to its program. In correspondence between the Union's most influential member, Ivan Akse-  
nov, and the LTsK leadership, Akse-  
nov argues that he is not engaged in any "factional activity", is not the leader of a group, and that the group has not really been properly established (the leaders of the Constructivists, apparently taking their cue from the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), did not tolerate any organized dissent within the movement).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, poems by the Union's participants have been preserved in the archive of the "konstromolety" Valentin Portugalov and published in a small print run only in 2013 (Isaeva 2013).

The general aesthetic principles of the Union of the Approximately Equal have been discussed very little in critical literature because this group remained "invisible" to researchers for many decades. Now we know that the Union apparently had a consistent, if not fully articulated, aesthetic program,

5 See letters about the Union of the Approximately Equal published in: Akse-  
nov 2008, vol. 2.

which indeed polemicized with the program of Selvinsky and the LTsK ideologue Kornelii Zelinsky. It is also clear that the group's participants did not appear to understand at the time of its inception (in 1929) just how radical their opposition to the LTsK program was. Satunovsky's poetry, meanwhile, shows clear traces of dialogue with Obolduev and Pul'kin. I will return to this in more detail later.

Satunovsky corresponded with Selvinsky in the 1940s–1960s. Apparently, the initiative in this communication came solely from the younger poet, Satunovsky. In May 1966, Satunovsky sent Selvinsky his 'adult' poems; before that he had sent only his works for children, which Selvinsky had praised. To the new letter, Selvinsky reacted unexpectedly nervously. He started the letter with the words "Dear Comrade Satunovsky", as if to a stranger, while in previous letters he addressed him "Dear Yakov Abramovich". Further Selvinsky wrote: «Стихи ваши производят странное впечатление. В них несомненно поэтическое чувство, но они очень слабы в смысле единства содержания. Мне кажется, будто в них — разорванность сознания»<sup>6</sup> (cit. after Burkov 2012).

Despite its brevity, Selvinsky's response is very important. It recalls his statements of the 1920s: Selvinsky reacted as if he had met a very old, long-forgotten opponent. In 1926–27, Selvinsky wrote a novella in verse, *Zapiski poëta* (*Notes of a Poet*), full of thinly-veiled (or not veiled at all, and very personal and overtly biased) commentary about the literary life of Moscow at the time. Its hero, the young modernist poet Eugene Ney, comes to Moscow to make his name and to find new writing friends, and soon falls in with the Constructivists, headed by the Chairman (in this character Selvinsky portrayed himself in a very complimentary way). In his monologue, the Chairman accuses Ney of making his poem too "decentralized", lacking a semantic center.

Но где же контроль? Нет контроля. Абсурд.

[...] Вот здесь и заложен ваш минус. Все превосходно:

6 "Your poems make a strange impression. There is undoubtedly a poetic feeling in them, but they are very weak in the sense of unity of content. It seems to me as if there were a *disintegrated* <literally, "torn". – I. K.> *consciousness* in them". Oleg Burkov cites the document from Piotr Satunovsky's (the younger brother of Yan Satunovsky) archive.

Ритмика, рифмика, образный иконостас,  
 Но в целом <ваша> баллада — разрозненное мироздание,  
 И той невидимой точки, вокруг которой  
 Могла бы организоваться система, — нет.  
 Ищите ее — эту точку. В ней-то все дело.  
 (Sel'vinskii 1928: 41)

But where's the control? There is no control. It's absurd.  
 [...] Here's where your minus lies. Everything is excellent:  
 The rhythemics, the rhyme scheme, the figurative iconostasis,  
 But as a whole <your> ballad is a disjointed universe,  
 And the one invisible point around which  
 A system could be organized — does not exist.  
 Look for that point. That's what it's all about.

The reproach of a lack of “unity of content” against Satunovsky strongly echoes the Chairman’s criticism. The very expression “razorvannost’ soznaniia” (“disintegration of consciousness”) or, more precisely, “razorvannoe soznanie” (“disintegrated consciousness”) is taken from the first manifesto of the Literary Center of Constructivists, “Znaem” (“We Know”), which was included in their 1924 joint collection *Mena vsekh* (*Swap Everybody*). Judging by the style, the authors of the following passage were Selvinsky and Cornelius (Kornelii) Zelinsky.

Гиблая теория «разорванного сознания» и ублюдыш ее — теория «смещения планов», растлив легковых поэтиков, усугубили в них волевое гниение; в результате ацентрических крошей и оползней развал русской поэзии достиг небывалых размеров. 98% нынешних произведений можно читать вкривь и вкось. Этот распад превратил современных поэтов в спецов узкой квалификации, сующих мандаты и патенты на: звук, ритм, образ, заумь и т. д. безотносительно к целому.  
 (Zelinsky/Chicherin/Selvinsky 1924: 8)

The pernicious theory of “torn consciousness” and its bastard child, the theory of “shifting planes”, corrupted the gullible little poets and aggravated the rotting of their will; as a result of these acentric crumbling and landslides, the

collapse of Russian poetry has reached unprecedented proportions. 98 % of the present works can be read this way or that <without any difference>. This disintegration has turned contemporary poets into narrowly qualified specialists, proffering mandates and patents on: sound, rhythm, imagery, zaum, etc., with no regard for the whole.

The Constructivists did not name their opponents, the authors of the ‘pernicious theories’, but their names are easy to reconstruct. “Disintegrated Consciousness” is the title of a 1919 article by Nikolai Punin, which states:

Громадная заслуга подлинного «футуризма» в том, что он сдвинул форму — сознание. Разбил, разломал, разорвал, вывернул, выдубил, вымерил, снова ставил, ломал и рвал. [...] Вот почему мерилом подлинно революционного искусства остается и до сих пор – «разорванное сознание».

(Punin 1919)

The tremendous merit of genuine “futurism” is that it shifted form – consciousness. It shattered, broke, tore apart, twisted, blew, measured, placed again, broke and tore. [...] This is why “disintegrated consciousness” still remains the measure of truly revolutionary art.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Punin himself probably took this term from the Russian translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: «[...] истинный дух есть единство абсолютно раздельного; он начинает существовать благодаря свободной действительности этих крайних членов, лишенных самости, в качестве их центра. [...] Честное сознание 1) берет каждый момент, как пребывающую существенность, и безмысленно не знает, что оно делает как раз обратное. Но разорванное сознание 2) есть сознание превращения, и даже превращения абсолютного; в нем господствует понятие, связывающее мысли, которые слишком сильно отдаляются от честности, и потому его язык является остроумным» (Gegel’ 1913: 237–238); German original: „Der wahre Geist [...] ist eben diese Einheit der absolut Getrennten, und zwar kommt er eben durch die freie Wirklichkeit dieser selbstlosen Extreme selbst als ihre Mitte zur Existenz. [...] Das ehrliche Bewußtsein 1) nimmt jedes Moment als eine bleibende Wesenheit und ist die ungebildete Gedankenlosigkeit nicht zu wissen, daß es eben so das Verkehrte tut. Das zerrissene Bewußtsein 2) aber ist das Bewußtsein der Verkehrung, und zwar der absoluten Verkehrung; der Begriff ist das Herrschende in ihm, der die Gedanken zusammenbringt, welche der Ehrlichkeit weit auseinanderliegen, und dessen Sprache daher geistreich ist» (Hegel 1907: 339).

The Constructivist term “shifting planes” seems to have been most associated with the Formalists in the 1920s (although it was not coined by them). In this sense, the authors of “We Know”, for all their biases, were historically accurate: Punin, who studied under Heinrich Wölfflin (Murray 2012: 273), can be considered one of the methodological predecessors of Russian Formalism. In his memoir, Punin wrote about the cultural situation in 1915: «Теории еще не родились, хотя Виктор Шкловский и был с нами, этот безумный, неукротимый, тогда еще совсем веселый человек, не успевший еще придумать формалистов»<sup>8</sup> (Punin 2018: 79). The term “shifting planes” appears, for example, in Tynianov’s 1921 article “Dostoevskii i Gogol’: k teorii parodii” (“Dostoevsky and Gogol (Towards a Theory of Parody)”; Tynianov 1977 (1921): 201). Soon after Tynianov, the term was picked up by Boris Pilniak, who gained great fame in 1922 after the publication of his novel *Golyi god* (*The Naked Year*), his first major prose work about the revolution of 1917. «Революция заставила разорвать в повести фабулу, заставила писать по принципу „смещения планов“»<sup>9</sup> (Pilniak 1922: 294), Pilniak wrote, explaining his novel.

Nikolai Berdyaev in *Krizis iskusstva* (*The Crisis of Art*, 1918) called the aesthetics of “shifting planes” the main sin of the Futurists. By “planes” Berdyaev meant not the material elements of the text, but metaphysical levels of being. Yet, the argumentation of the Constructivists in the “accusatory” section of their manifesto is unexpectedly close to Berdyaev’s. The philosopher wrote:

Отрицание потустороннего — один из пунктов футуристической программы. Поэтому они отражают лишь процесс разложения в физическом плане. В своем творчестве они воспринимают лишь осколки и клочья старой плоти мира, отражают смещения планов, не ведая смысла происходящего.

(Berdiaev 1918: 14)

8 “The theories had not yet been born, although Viktor Shklovsky was with us, this mad, indomitable, back then still quite cheerful man who had not yet had time to invent the Formalists”.

9 “The revolution forced me to break the story’s fabula, forced me to write according to the principle of ‘shifting planes’”.



The denial of the transcendental is one of the points of the Futurist program. This is why they reflect only the process of decomposition in the physical plane. In their work they perceive only fragments and shreds of the old flesh of the world, reflect the shifting of planes, without knowing the meaning of what is happening.

In the second half of the 1920s, the relations between the Constructivists and the LEFists became increasingly conflicted, and with the Formalists, conversely, more closely aligned. With the Formalists of the younger generation (Lydia Ginzburg, Boris Bukhshtab, and others), the Constructivists even planned to publish a joint literary and philological almanac in the late 1920s (Savitskii 2008: 23). But what is more important for our purposes is not the specific addressees of the polemic, but the counterargument that the authors of “We Know” put forward: art should reintegrate the consciousness of modern man, including in the political sense. For this purpose, Formalists’ “external motivations” (Victor Shklovsky’s term) should be replaced by consciously constructed internal connections.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, Selvinsky recognized in Satunovsky’s mature poetry a return of the aesthetics he had once opposed with fellow Constructivists. While he correctly identified Satunovsky’s poetics as opposing his own, he missed the essence of this opposition. To analyze this disagreement, one must briefly trace the origins of literary Constructivism and why Satunovsky opposed it, even as he maintained correspondence with Selvinsky into the 1960s.

### **3. Reasons for Satunovsky’s interest in Selvinsky: the phenomenology of speech**

The basic aesthetic and ideological ideas of the Constructivist manifestos are well known to literary historians. The Constructivists declared their main tasks to be:

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10 The aesthetic association between “shifting planes” and explaining the composition only by “external motivations” (according to Shklovsky) becomes clear from Tsiv’ian 2010: 151–163.

1. comprehension of the processes of modernization, poetic analysis of the interaction between man and technology necessary to bring the proletariat closer to “modern high technology and the whole developed system of cultural superstructures”<sup>11</sup> (Sel’vinskii/Inber/Zelinskii et al. 1925: 9);
2. the introduction of “non-poetic” elements into poems, such as tables, quotations from documents etc.;
3. increasing role of the plot in verse in contrast to its weakening in the work of the Futurists;
4. the so-called “gruzifikatsiia” (“loadification”, a term invented by Zelinsky), i.e. maximizing the semantic “load” (gruz) on each of the semantic elements of the poem;
5. constructing a poem on the basis of the so-called “localizing device” (“lokal’nyi priem”), i.e. consciously subordinating all levels of the poem, especially metaphor, to its main topic;
6. the development of a special verse structure – “taktovik” (“beat verse”)<sup>12</sup>.

Alongside these declared aesthetic discoveries, the central figures of the Constructivist movement promoted another principle – not so much aesthetic as anthropological: the poetic features were intended to help intelligent readers develop personal loyalty to the Bolshevik regime, recognizing its flaws while accepting its historical necessity. However, the movement’s declared principles were not explicitly tied to political loyalty. This tension made Constructivism internally contradictory from the beginning. Its “dissidents” included Alexei N. Chicherin (see Grübel 1987) and Ivan Aksenov (both crucial to the movement’s early formation), as well as Georgy Obolduev.

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11 «<K> современной высокой техник<e> и всей развитой систем<e> культурных надстроек».

12 The Constructivists were talking about the peculiarity of their verse already in the early 1920s, but the term “taktovik” was substantiated by Alexander Kviatkovsky only in 1928. In Kviatkovsky’s understanding, it was not only a new meter, but also a specific manner of declamation characteristic of the Futurists and Constructivists. “Beats”, in Kviatkovsky’s interpretation, are isochronous (equal in reading time), regardless of the number of syllables they contain (see, for example: Kviatkovskii 1929; Kviatkovskii 1966). The term “taktovik” was often used in studies of poetry of the 1920s–1960s (by Vladimir Piast, Georgy Shengeli, Ilya Selvinsky), but only at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s did Mikhail Gasparov give it a formal definition which did not involve the criterion of “declamation” (Gasparov 1968).

Another principle that was important for all Constructivists (including Chicherin and Obolduev, and to a lesser extent Aksenov) is a poetic phenomenology of speech, or a poetic version of *skaz*, i.e. a written imitation of oral speech with all its irregularities and ellipses. Selvinsky stylized his poems as Sinti and Roma songs and incorporated ‘phonetic reproductions’ of the voice play of an agitated singer. Other poems were similarly stylized as the narratives of criminals; Selvinsky used the slang of the Odesa gangs, and grammatical constructions characteristic of Odesa Jews, which were being canonized around this time in Babel’s stories about the robber Benia Krik. Consider the following examples from “Tsyganskii val’s na gitare” (“Gypsy waltz on guitar”, 1922), and “Motke-Malkhamoves” (1924):

«Милы-лый мо-й — не? сердься:  
 Не тебе моё горико?е сердьце —  
 В нем Яга наварила с перы?цем ядыды  
 Чёрыну?ю пену любви».  
 [...]

Ах, нночь-чи? Сонаны. Прох?ладыда  
 Здесь в аллеях загалоше?го сады...  
 И доносится толико стон? (эс) гит-тарарары  
 Таратин?на  
 Таратина  
 Тап...  
 (Sel’vinskii 1972: 66)<sup>13</sup>

“My de-de-dear one – don’t? be angry:  
 My bit-ter-er heart is not for you –  
 In it Baba Ya-ga has brewed with spi?-i-ce a poi-poi-son  
 The bla-a?-ck foam of love...”

Ah, ni-ights? Drea-eamy. Cool?-ool-ness  
 Here in the alle-eyes of an overgro?-own gar-den...

13 The question mark in Selvinsky’s early poems was used not only in its usual function, but also to indicate a raising of the voice, “es” – a pause, a meaningful omission of a syllable.

And only the mo-oans (es) of a gui-ta-ar carry...

Taratin?na

Tara-tina

Tan...

Полчаса назад — усики нафабрены,  
По горлу рубчик, об глаз пятно —  
Он, как вроде балабус, обошёл фабрику,  
Он!.. А знаменитэр ин Одэсс блатной...  
(Ibid.)

Half an hour ago – with waxed mustache,  
A fresh scar on his throat, a dark spot round his eye –  
Like a balabus<sup>14</sup> he walked around the factory,  
He! The znameniter<sup>15</sup> gangster of Odesa.

This interest in the ‘phenomenology of speech’ was typical of Selvinsky from his youth. The first two stanzas of another 1922 poem, “Vor” (“The Thief”) was likewise based on criminal slang (in my rough translation, I have tried to convey the degree of its lexical “transgressiveness”, reminiscent of modern English-language rap):

Вышел на арапа. Канает буржуй.  
А по пузу — золотой бамбер.  
«Мусью, сколько время?» — Легко подхожу..  
Дзззызь промеж роги!.. — и амба.

Только хотел было снять часы —  
Чья-то шмара шипит: «Шестая».  
Я, понятно, хода. За тюк. За весы.  
А мильтонов — чертова стая.  
(Ibid.: 62)

<sup>14</sup> “Balabus” (or “balebos”) – “master”, “boss”, or “owner” (Yiddish).

<sup>15</sup> The word “znameniter” is a Yiddish-influenced pronunciation of the Russian word “znamenitiy” (“famous” or “notorious”).



фырсь,  
     пырсь,  
         фортинбрас,  
 братцы,  
     нас бомблять!  
 («В период наступления...», 1943; [24])

...flying  
     and flying back again  
         the messerers.  
 And  
     fly-  
         ing-  
             back again...  
 Xi,  
     phi, chi, psi,  
         omega!  
 Birds flying,  
     look left, –  
 bam,  
     crash,  
         fortinbras,  
 guys,  
     them bombs are aimed at us!  
 (“During the attack...”, 1943)<sup>16</sup>

This poem both depicts and ironically parodies the speech of a soldier stunned by sudden enemy bombing. The series of short Greek letters – “Xi, phi, chi, psi, omega!” – conveys the soldier’s intense emotions through clipped exclamations, or perhaps simply the meaningless cries of soldiers running from their truck to roadside cover. The poem’s ending turns on linguistic ambiguity: ‘bombliat’ means “they are bombing us” in Ukrainian, suggesting either that Satunovsky, who grew up in Ukraine, unconsciously switches to this language in moments of danger, or that he is “quoting” a Ukrainian soldier riding in the

16 I am very grateful to Ainsley Morse for her translation made for this article.

same truck. Yet ‘bombliat’ also resembles the obscene Russian word ‘bliad’, which literally means “prostitute” but functions in colloquial Russian as an emotionally charged filler or intensifier between words and phrases. Like Selvinsky’s poem, Satunovsky’s work employs a skaz-like recreation of everyday speech – illogical, fragmented, and profanity-laden. The crucial difference is that Satunovsky’s narrator, who closely resembles the author himself, includes himself among those he parodies.

The question of why this ‘phenomenology of speech’ interested Satunovsky merits separate analysis, which I will return to shortly. First, however, it is important to discuss what, by contrast, distanced Satunovsky from Selvinsky and the Constructivists in general.

#### 4. Deconstruction of teleologically predetermined unity

For most Soviet poets of the post-revolutionary generation, the horizon for understanding reality was the teleological dimension of history. They wrote poetry from the position of those who had made a religious covenant – as with God – with history, aimed at the achievement of communism. Modernity, or more precisely, the revolutionary transformation of society, was perceived by many as a trial that condemned some to lifelong excommunication from the future, while requiring others to change and become new people. This idea of man’s place in history was reflected most deeply and consistently in the literary and political program of the Constructivists (Gol’dstein 1997; Kukulin 2014).

From the outset, the Constructivists’ guiding principle was the ‘wholeness’ of the work, opposing the ‘discontinuity’ of Cubism, Cubo-Futurism, and modernism in general. In the manifesto “We Know” they wrote:

Конструкция состоит из частей, нами названных КОНСТРУЭМАМИ. [...] каждая констрвэма — законченная форма, принесящая себя в жертву стойкости целого.

Конструэмы бывают: ГЛАВНЫЕ, ВСПОМОГАТЕЛЬНЫЕ и ОРНАМЕНТАЛЬНЫЕ.

ГЛАВНАЯ конструэма — задание; в ячейке ее находится матка конструкции.

[...] ГЛАВНАЯ или МАГИСТРАЛЬНАЯ КОНСТРУЭМА, в зависимости от характера организуемого, определяет строй всей конструкции. [...] МАГИСТРАЛЬ (ядро бухнувшей матки) влияет на удельный вес остальных. Конструкция держится на упоре в нее. Сдвиг ее изменяет строй конструкции.  
(Zelinskii/Chicherin/Sel'vinskii 1924: 8)

A [verbal] construction is made up of parts, which we call CONSTRUEMES. [...] each construeme is a complete form that has sacrificed itself to the stability of the whole.

Construemes are: PRIMARY, SUPPORTING and ORNAMENTAL.

The PRIMARY construeme is the task; its cell contains the womb of the construction.

[...] The PRIMARY or MAIN CONSTRUEME, depending on the nature of what is being organized, determines the structure of the whole construction. [...] The MAIN (the core of the swelling womb) influences the specific weight of the others. The construction is held together by its support. Shifting it changes the structure of the construction.

This wholeness of the work was perceived by the Constructivists – above all by Zelinsky and Selvinsky – as a representation of the unity of the human personality reassembled after the modernist “torn (disintegrated) consciousness” and, moreover, as a tool for *creating* such unity. Let us recall that the authors of “We Know” reproached contemporary poets with “rotting of the will” (“volevoe gnienie”). In the opinion of the Constructivists, expressed in this and subsequent manifestos, art should re-integrate the consciousness of modern man.

In this appeal to ‘wholeness’, the Constructivists, and Zelinsky in particular, drew on the theories of the philosopher and social activist Alexander Bogdanov, who sought to synthesize Marxism, Nietzscheanism, and neo-positivism in his work. In his articles of the 1920s, Zelinsky regularly referred to Bogdanov, while adding the ritual accusations against him following his fall from political grace. Bogdanov had been the object of aggressive criticism in Lenin’s book *Materializm i èmpiriokritsitsizm* (*Materialism and Empirocriticism*, 1909), and in general Lenin regarded Bogdanov’s philosophical activities very negatively. However, Bogdanov’s influence on Zelinsky appears significant, however the latter was mostly conforming to the demands of Soviet



censorship and the atmosphere of political intolerance created in late-1920s Soviet literature by RAPP authors.

Like other major thinkers of the early twentieth century including Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, and William James, Bogdanov believed that the unity of the human self was an illusion, that the self was a complex of sensations, and therefore had to be constantly reintegrated. In his view, the liberation of the subject in the absence of a permanent self is the realization of personal will as a 'projection' of the inexorable laws of history discovered by Marx and Engels. A supra-personal historical teleology embodied in the concrete subject is what resists the pressure of rigid, inert society<sup>17</sup>.

The Constructivists sought to present the teleological wholeness of the individual (called for by Bogdanov) as the necessary condition of the Russian intellectual who wanted to remain faithful to the revolutionary cause. The Constructivists understood literary creativity as a kind of integral social-psychological technology for the transformation of the self. In their polemics with the Futurists, Selvinsky and Zelinsky insisted that the Futurists did not sufficiently meet the requirements of the Soviet era, since they were only capable of destroying the 'old' culture. It was the Constructivists who could and should accomplish the task of synthesizing a new aesthetics.

The Constructivists understood this new aesthetics as teleologically oriented. All the elements of a poem – the *construemes* – were to be subordinated to the main task of the poem just as all the elements of the psyche were to be subordinated to a single political task. However, in the case of both the poem and psychic life, the Constructivists were talking about assembling initially heterogeneous elements into the 'force field' of a unified end – a concept of the human they appear to have learned from Bogdanov.

The Constructivists were not unique in this understanding of literature, but they were the most consistent and self-reflexive representatives of Soviet literature in its formative stage. Soviet literature, and especially Soviet poetry, was based on the *idea of the teleological self*. The starting point of self-consciousness in Soviet poetry was the author's 'covenant with history', which had to be established before the author could begin to create a work. Any poet who accepted the Soviet rules of the game saw him- or herself as existing in the conditions of the *a priori* meaningful course of history, which opened the

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17 See for example: Bogdanov 1905.

road to the future: the goals of the individual had to coincide with the goal of world history.

The Constructivists saw violence as the most important tool for remaking the self and society. They adhered to a system of beliefs that the anthropologist James Scott called “high modernism”, an attitude that presumes that society can be radically changed for the better according to a preconceived plan involving violence carried out and/or supported by a specially trained elite (Scott 1998: 87–102).<sup>18</sup> From a Constructivist perspective, such a remaking of society could be dramatic or even tragic, but necessary and inevitable. The belief in progress gave all events in history a kind of “ideological surplus value” – these events were signs of progress or of resistance to it. In the Constructivist view of things, the state should allow intellectuals individual cooperation and individual interpretation of both progress itself and its contradictions.

In Soviet poetry, and more broadly in Soviet literature, several versions of the ‘covenant with history’ were possible. These versions can be conditionally divided into two groups. The egalitarian version of the covenant assumed that its subject was the ‘proletariat’ or the ‘people’ – a broad social community in which each person was equal to others and could be replaced by another. The Constructivists developed in detail a different, intellectual and elitist version of the covenant: the aesthetics they proposed promoted not the mass but the individual cultivation of the subjects of the covenant, who in this case were allies of the Bolshevik Party, critically-minded and at the same time prepared to self-censor. This aesthetic drew on modernist experiments and became the basis for the poetry of the moderate oppositional intelligentsia of the post-war period: Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, Robert Rozhdestvensky, and to a certain extent Bella Akhmadulina (Kukulin 2025).

As mentioned, members of the Union of the Approximately Equal resisted the teleological program of the LTsK. Common features of Obolduev’s and Pul’kin’s poems from the late 1920s include unusual rhythms (frequent combinations of elements of free verse and rhymed tonic verse), ironic use of lists and enumerations, and an orientation toward maximally intense yet simultaneously analytical experience of the present moment.<sup>19</sup> For Pul’kin, this

<sup>18</sup> On Lenin’s vision of Bolshevism as an exemplar of high modernism: Scott 1998: 147–179.

<sup>19</sup> Aksekov, at the time of the Union’s creation, was publishing as a critic and translator of poetry but was not publishing original poems – at least, none are currently known.

“present moment” is almost always a moment of passionate attraction to a woman. One suspects that the enormous quantity of erotic poems in Pul’kin’s legacy was determined not by Pul’kin’s own amorous activities, but by the way erotic experience serves him as a kind of model for falling out of teleological time. Similarly, Pul’kin’s unfinished long poem “S.S.S.R (Inventarizatsiia s primechaniiami)” (“U.S.S.R. (Inventory with Notes)”, 1930–1931), apparently inspired by Obolduev’s experiments in style and verse, depicts not so much the “construction of communism” as urban everyday life, the simultaneity of diverse processes unfolding before an enthusiastic observer’s eyes. Thus, not only Obolduev, who was critical of the Soviet regime from the very beginning, but also Pul’kin, who until his arrest in 1934 evinced deep political loyalty, undermined the Constructivist idea of a ‘covenant with history’.<sup>20</sup>

Beginning with his first mature poem in 1938, “U chasovogo ia sprosila...” (“I asked the guard...”), Satunovsky consistently and quite consciously deconstructed the aesthetics of the intellectual and individual ‘covenant with history’ formed in Constructivism.

У часового я спросил:  
скажите, можно ходить по плотине?  
— Идите! — ответил часовой  
и сплюнул за перила.

Сняв шляпу,  
я пошел  
по плотине,  
овеянной славой,  
с левого берега  
на правый,

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20 Pul’kin was arrested on February 2, 1934, on charges of “homosexuality” (and spent a year in the camps before being released), but – as Ivan Akhmet’ev aptly notes – shortly before this, Georgy Obolduev and the poet Sergei Bobrov (1889–1971), who, like Aksenov, had influenced Obolduev and Pul’kin (in the pre-revolutionary period, Bobrov and Aksenov were friends and members of the Futurist group “Centrifuge”), had been arrested on political charges (Pul’kin 2018: 569). It is possible that the arrest of all these poets was part of a single NKVD campaign to “uproot” authors who might participate in underground literary gatherings after the organization of the Writers’ Union in 1934.

и статью из Конституции прочел.

Так вот он, Днепрострой.

Я вижу

символ овеществленного труда,

а подо мной стоит вода

с одной стороны выше,

с другой стороны ниже.

*Сентябрь 1938, Запорожье*

[7]

I asked the guard:

Sir, can I walk out on the dam?

“Go ahead!” replied the guard

and spat over the handrail.

Taking off my hat,

I walked

out onto the dam,

wreathed in glory,

from the left bank

to the right

and recited an article from the Constitution.

So here it is, the Dnipro Dam.

I see

a symbol of materialized labor,

while below me there is water,

higher on one side,

lower on the other.

*September 1938, Zaporizhhia*<sup>21</sup>

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21 Translation by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko. Perhaps this entire poem is a polemic with a fragment from Selvinsky's novella in verse *Notes of a Poet*: «Хлесткая пощечина ветра

For Satunovsky's protagonist, the Dnipro Dam (Dneproges) is not a symbol of progress, but only of "materialized labor". This term of Marxist political economy is used here to reduce pathos. The man walking along the dam has taken off his hat, either out of reverence for the building or to prevent it from being blown away by the river wind. He does not feel that he is part of the team that built Dnipro Dam but is trying to rethink the relationship between himself and the object he perceives as an image of official propaganda, which is why he views the dam with a respectful but slightly distancing gaze.

Satunovsky needed to deconstruct the 'covenant with history' in order to overcome the violence that underpinned the Soviet project, to refuse to see this violence as teleologically necessary. The rejection of violence in Satunovsky's poems is accompanied by a rejection of the teleological understanding of progress. Satunovsky's subject exists in history in a different way than the subject of loyal Soviet poetry: each of Satunovsky's poems records the trajectory of an illumination.<sup>22</sup> This insight allows everyday experience to be deconstructed and revisited as a transcendence of familiar scenarios and cause-and-effect relationships. In other words, Satunovsky's poems embody a momentary restructuring of consciousness that allows one to suspend everyday human existence and everyday language use, to see them from the outside, to free oneself from them.

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сшибла с меня шляпу, / И та, зачерпнув воды, пошла на плотину. / Тут я заметил, что нахожусь у реки, / Куда уверенно шагали хрюкающие галоши. / Мои длинные волосы и красный галстук богемы / Посылали ей прощальный привет. Но я, / Нахлобучив на глазницы мрачную шляпу меланхолии, / И тяжело опираясь на черную трость тоски, / Взошел на мост...» (Selvinskii 1928: 17; "The stinging slap of the wind knocked my hat off, / And it, scooping up water, headed toward the dam. / Then I noticed that I was by the river, / Where my grunting galoshes were confidently striding. / My long hair and the red bohemian tie / Were sending it a farewell greeting. But I, / Pulling down over my eye sockets the gloomy hat of melancholy, / And heavily leaning on the black cane of anguish, / Ascended the bridge..."). Selvinsky replaces Evgenii Ney, a neurasthenic character, with an autobiographical stoic character who does not succumb to the ideological hypnosis even of such a structure as the Dnipro Dam.

- 22 I would use Walter Benjamin's term "profane illumination" (*profane Erleuchtung*), but this would require a critique of the epistemological implication of Benjamin's work for surrealism, which is beyond the scope of this paper. See in detail: Benjamin 2005: 209. For more on Benjamin and illumination in Satunovsky, see Anna Glazova's contribution to this volume.

Selvinsky recognized something disruptive or disjointed in Satunovsky's poetry, but he misunderstood the nature of that disruption. When Punin wrote about "torn consciousness" in 1919, he was talking about the experiments of Velimir Khlebnikov. Selvinsky lacked the analytical tools to distinguish Khlebnikov's "torn consciousness" from Satunovsky's anti-teleological aesthetics. Selvinsky sensed that Satunovsky's poems polemicized with the cause he had served all his life but did not understand how this polemic was set up. Selvinsky recognized Satunovsky's poetics as anti-teleological and based on the reproduction of spoken language and the montage of short fragments and therefore associated it with futurism. However, Satunovsky's poetry was not based on a futuristic analysis of language, but on a post-avant-garde – and post-utopian – analysis of everyday consciousness.

Let us now turn to the question of why Satunovsky remained interested in Selvinsky's work for so long, and what he continued to see as a kinship between their approaches to poetry. The "phenomenology of speech", as practiced by both Selvinsky and his opponents within Constructivism, can be understood in two profoundly interrelated ways. First, the consistent portrayal of different types and manners of speech could form the basis for a 'panoramic' depiction of a vast and diverse country. As with *skaz* prose narrative, this diversity of represented speech stems from a sense of wonder at the variety of thought and expression that spilled into the public sphere during World War I and the Russian Civil War. It also reflects a desire to present this diversity as constitutive of a new unity around a new grand narrative, or mainline (*magistral'*), to use the Constructivist term. Selvinsky used his cult of linguistic hypercompetence for this very purpose.

Secondly, the 'phenomenological', defamiliarizing depiction of oral and literary speech can be understood as a demonstration of a consciousness not subordinated to ideology or any other grand narrative, but striving to coordinate different discourses with each other or living at the intersection of incompatible, contrasting discourses. This was the position held by Obolduev and shared in part by Ivan Aksenov, whose view of history was teleological only during the revolution. It can also be seen in Satunovsky's work. Aksenov had written montage poems even before the revolution, which depicted the coexistence of incommensurable discursive movements in the consciousness of one subject, according to the principle of montage:

[...] Где это сердятся турники?  
Сколько морщин в этой улыбке!  
А башенные пауки  
Шевелят робко  
Меловой милый лунь для луны  
Проявлять ли теперь этот негатив?

НЕИЗБЕЖНО!

потому что только воздух была песня  
(Несмотря на совершенно невыносимую манеру отель-  
ной прислуги отворять, в отсутствии, окна в улицу)  
Нет! Нет! Нет! Н е п о з д н о  
И весть еще дрожит.  
И не будет тебе никакого сахара  
Пока не уберут, не утолкут трут  
Растоптанные войной над землей озими  
Жалооконное  
О горестной доле,  
О канифоле,  
О каприфоле  
Безграалие на горе.  
И не видно ни краю, ни отдыха [...]

(«Мюнхен», февраль 1914; Aksenov 2022: 44–45)

[...] Where do these horizontal bars get angry?  
How many wrinkles in this smile!  
And tower-dwelling spiders  
Timidly stir  
A chalky dear kite-hawk for the moon  
Should this negative be developed now?

INEVITABLE!

because the song was only air

(Despite the completely unbearable manner of hotel servants opening windows to the street in one's absence)  
 No! No! No! N o t t o o l a t e  
 And the news still trembles.  
 And you'll get no sugar at all  
 Until they clear away, until they pound down the tinder  
 Winter crops trampled by war above the earth  
 Window-lament  
     About the sorrowful fate,  
     About rosin,  
     About honeysuckle  
         Holy-Grail-lessness on the mountain.  
 And no end or rest in sight [...]

("Munich", February 1914)

By juxtaposing contrasting fragments from different discourses and adding individualized but somewhat ironically employed religious metaphors, Akse-  
 nov aimed primarily at analyzing and (as would be said much later) decon-  
 structing social conventions. Akse-  
 nov needed this deconstruction to expose  
 the commonplaces of language and thought characteristic of the emerging  
 mass society; this inclination toward exposure was characteristic of radical  
 avant-garde authors (e.g., Dadaists and Surrealists). In post-revolutionary  
 society, the analysis of everyday speech or deconstruction of common sense  
 acquired existential significance. Such practices allowed authors of uncen-  
 sored poetry to resist the propaganda-imposed uniform worldview, which  
 was far more powerful and systematized than the various competing forms of  
 bourgeois doxa in pre-revolutionary society. In other words, in Soviet society,  
 the defamiliarization of everyday speech and thought became a means of indi-  
 vidual resistance and reconstruction of personal dignity. Probably the first to  
 follow this path in Russian-language poetry was Obolduev. Satunovsky took  
 the next step. His poems subject his own consciousness to this analysis – con-  
 sciousness as something alien, traumatized, and already inured to everything.  
 Therefore, Satunovsky's poems directly include himself in the picture of soci-  
 ety that they defamiliarize.



## Conclusion

Satunovsky's sophisticated irony, intellectualism and use of the grotesque can be partially traced back to Selvinsky's poetics, but Satunovsky used the same elements for very different purposes. Only in 1966, after receiving Selvinsky's letter, did Satunovsky realize how different their tasks in poetry were. This realization was part of a larger-scale process: around this time, Satunovsky, who had recently retired, began to take stock of his own life. On May 6, shortly before he received the letter from Selvinsky, Satunovsky wrote the poem "Prishel rybak..." ("The Fisherman Came..."), in which he ironically and at the same time very seriously deconstructs the Soviet ideology of historical progress and de facto announces – above all to himself – its final collapse.

Друг мой, железный ослик,  
мирно ржавеет на базе.  
В воздухе есть ядовитая соль —  
хлористый натрий.  
Бог ли ее сотворил, или чисто случайно  
соль появилась на свет — никто не знает.

Может быть, Сталин знал.  
Ведь не зря, говорят,  
у Берии были компрометирующие материалы  
на Карла Маркса.  
[193]

My friend, the iron donkey,  
calmly rusts on his pedestal.  
The air is thick with poisonous salt:  
sodium chloride.  
Whether God created it, or it was sheer chance  
that brought salt into the world, nobody knows.

Maybe Stalin knew.  
After all, they do say

Beria had compromising materials  
on Karl Marx.

6 May 1966, Yalta<sup>23</sup>

Judging by everything we know about him, Satunovsky came to disagree with this ideology as early as the 1930s, but here he voices a ‘final word’ on the topic.<sup>24</sup>

It is tempting to assume that Satunovsky sent his works to Selvinsky in May 1966 immediately after he had written “The Fisherman Came...” in order to test whether Selvinsky really retained his belief in the teleological nature of history after Stalinism. After Satunovsky received an answer to his question, he apparently pondered it for several months, and on October 21, he wrote “I remember the LCC, the literary center of the Constructivists...” – a poem about the collapse of his hopes for Soviet revolutionary modernism.

In 1975, Satunovsky wrote a poem that demonstrates even greater disillusionment with the poet who had once been significant to him:

Илья Сельвинский, мастер миниатюры,  
в 27-м году написал в Коктебеле «Пушторг».  
Я в его честь сочинил стихотворение. Вот:  
«Комплекс Паниковского (мemento мори!)»  
— Топите его! Этот старик сцят в море!  
[381]

Il’ia Selvinsky, master of the miniature,  
in ’27 wrote “Pushtorg” in Koktebel’,  
In his honor I composed a poem. Here it is:  
*The Panikovsky Complex (memento mori!)*  
“– Drown him! This old man is pissing in the sea!”

“Pushtorg” is a long verse novel, but Selvinsky is called “master of the miniature” here because in 1931 he published a poem consisting of a single line – which at that time looked like a provocative gesture:

<sup>23</sup> Translation by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko.

<sup>24</sup> To use Mikhail Bakhtin’s term (for more details see: Kukulin 2021).

## АФОРИЗМ КАРАИМСКОГО ФИЛОСОФА БАБАКАЙ-СУДДУКА

«Лучше недо, чем пере».

(Selvinsky 1931: 42)<sup>25</sup>

## APHORISM OF THE KARAITE PHILOSOPHER BABAKAY-SUDDUK

“Better underdo than overdo”.

In his handbook for young authors published in the 1950s, Selvinsky defended the right of poets to write one-line poems, which provoked abuse in print from the well-known Stalinist writer Ivan Shevtsov (Kuz'min 2016).

Mikhail Panikovsky is a character from the popular novel *Zolotoi telenok* (*The Golden Calf*, 1931) by Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov. A petty swindler and pickpocket, he is depicted in the novel as a caricaturish old man who tries to appear young and complains that “the girls don't love him”. Over the course of the novel, Panikovsky dies while trying to catch up to two younger swindlers.<sup>26</sup> This is the Panikovsky that Satunovsky links to Selvinsky.

However, Satunovsky was also thinking ironically about himself in this poem: the poem was written in the same Koktebel' as “Pushtorg”, and in 1975 the 62-year-old Satunovsky also felt that he was no longer young («Никак не запомню, что я старик (старик — такое амплуа)»; from a 1970 poem, [311]).<sup>27</sup> Overall, the meaning of this poem can be conveyed as follows: “I, like Selvinsky in his time, have become a ridiculous old man provoking irony from those around me, and I too – like Panikovsky – could suddenly die”. The very idea of poetic dialogue – at least with Selvinsky – is ironically travestied in this poem.

Satunovsky's youthful relationship with the Constructivists and Selvinsky's reaction to Satunovsky's mature poems illuminate a crucial moment in the divergence between loyal and uncensored poetry in the USSR. Like the Constructivists, Satunovsky and other representatives of the Lianozovo

<sup>25</sup> In the book, this poem is dated 1921.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the significance of this scene, see: Vinitsky 2020.

<sup>27</sup> “I can't seem to remember that I'm an old man (old man – such a role)”. For more on Satunovsky and old age, see Golburt's contribution to this volume.

school sought a phenomenological analysis of language and consciousness. However, they refused to incorporate this analysis into teleological historical schemes. This refusal marked a decisive break from the Soviet literary mainstream. Rather than seeing literature as a tool for remaking consciousness in accordance with historical progress, they were interested in how the private individual experienced and responded to a society that was subject to such schemes and controlled through violence. This shift from a teleological to a phenomenological understanding of human consciousness became one of the defining features of uncensored poetry, distinguishing it from the officially sanctioned literary production that remained committed to the ‘covenant with history’, throughout all the changes in the ideological climate over more than seventy years of Soviet history.

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