

Ksenia Golubovich (Russia)

Silencium

After our panel on Monday Natasha approached me and said: you know, I liked everything a lot but for some reason you guys stay out of political matters. A few years ago it would have been all just about politics. I thought about this, and here is what I would like to say. It is true that talking about Russia seems at present to be avoiding any political matters whatsoever. And that is for a good reason. There is no politics. Things seem to have been shut down, shoveled away. What remains is a blank space of silence, simply decorated by a few ornaments on the left and on the right of what once used to be a promising political spectrum.

There are many reasons for this. Some say economical change always makes things worse at first. What do you expect, say the others, a society like this was bound to have had all those horrible things surface and come in the open— after all, all relationships (to work, to property, to money, to human dignity) were so distorted that only the heavy lid of communism would have been able to keep everything quiet. And there are voices in between, those lamenting the fall of the socialist state, those attacking the real implementation of the socialist idea, voices hurling accusations against all of Russian history with its serfdom and unfair privileges, voices accusing all Russians of being incapable to stand up to their government and to fight for democracy. There are voices accusing the East, and there are voices accusing the West—all voices I know so well and which form my identity and its “hellish orchestra,” and which occupy all points of what would be called the political spectrum, had they not been so deeply, maddeningly, internal.

“Kitchen talk,” they used to call it—once dangerous, now tantamount to silence. Opinion cutting across opinion, negating and being negated, as if in a game of criss-cross where no one is likely to ever win. Young people don’t want to talk about “these matters;” their policy is “to live,” “to have fun,” and to “earn money” or whatever of the other policies TV delivers to them in the form of “product-placement” and “advertising.” What they do know about those once political “opinions” comes to them through soap operas, talk-shows, movies. Depending on who the client is, who pays the bill for this or that item, a TV program can be “liberal” (plot: a well-intentioned businessman and a young smart girl try to “make their firm work”), or “nationalist” (a soldier fighting for his country and dignity and --provided the touch is liberal--falling in love with a girl on the enemy side); or else there will be a “humor” program, a comic show of cheap laughter whose audience is made up of those to have profited the least from any social changes.

But rather than being political statements, all these assorted points of view finally amount to the selling of just another group of commodities, this time of the ideological kind, with their own marketing, target groups and social engineering. Each part of the social spectrum is catered to. What it all adds up to is a strange mix of consumerism, Soviet nostalgia, the newest forms of nationalism, and then, on the other hand, the love of travel, MTV and glossy luxury. All these are different ideologies which coexist on ground zero, the medicated contract of social silence, the latest pact between power and the people.

Funnily enough this ground zero has now found its way into broad swaths of expression.

The beginning of 2006 saw a new Russian blockbuster, *Night Watch*, a sequel to *Day Watch*, which was on the screen a year earlier. A fantasy mixed with action, this Russian version of a Hollywood product aspired to surpass the American products of the same type, at least on the local scene, for it uses very much the local scene and its particularities as its subject-matter—e.g. the Big Battle between good and evil. The characters, their motives and their appearances, are wholly borrowed from Russian soap operas or film-series. Basically the film rearranges two sets of images: the “Good” ones are the Soviet-type, state-oriented people, the “Bad” are glossy and luxurious. The two groups coexist; each side with some supernatural power surpassing the normal human scope. The most horrible thing that can ever happen—according to the ideology of this film—is if the sides enter the final battle. Then all the middle-world, the world of the people where good and bad are mixed, will come to naught. Thus the answer is always balance of forces, equilibrium, a mutually agreed-upon abstaining from final words, that really lies underneath the multiplicity of ideologies and perspectives? The interesting thing here of course is the very concept of “Good” and “Bad”—“Good” is seen as the “State” which provides electricity, water, heating and, if necessary, certain “repressions” of human rights, “Bad” is the individual striving for success that can go over other people’s heads but which makes life more interesting. These concepts are very relative, and presuppose that the final Truth will never be attained. This, to my mind, can be called the core and essence of the social peace in Russia. If all words and politics are senseless, the whole world is only about that balance of power, where Communists, state officials and liberals came to a mutual agreement. The interesting thing is of course that common or “average” people, have no say in any of this, whether in life or on screen, and that those who are in power are viewed as super-beings, elite groups fighting their own surreal battles, and providing us, their audience, with the safe and agreed-upon attitudes with which to identify...

All language is theirs. We remain silent.

As somebody once put it to me directly: “You want me to write an article for you; which type of attitude would you like me to stylize and emulate?” He was not thinking about what he had to say; he was thinking about which kind of product I would like to order up and pay for. For it does not matter any more. As long as the “white drug container” stays the same, as long as everybody keeps quiet, it does not matter what sticker it carries. It has the attitude of Polonius.

So, at this point I would like to play Hamlet.

Hamlet says:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass ... Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me.

I would like to ask: what on earth are we so silent about? If the political rhetoric is nothing more than bad theatre, every actor---before he or she even opens his or her mouth--knows what the words are that are so hushed and so unlikely to be spoken. Should, or must, we take the risk of breaking the silence that seems to suit everyone? It is not only words such as Chechnya, the Kursk submarine, or Khodorkovsky, or indeed Lenin and Che Guevara--that break this silence, distant---though troubling--- echoes of the unspoken words, and names and deeds that really lie buried underneath the surface.

Who are we?---the nation of survivors trying to forget all those millions of victims in whose stead we now live, trying to forget the way we were all those 80 years; the compromises we and our families made; the lies we uttered, the lies which formed the very identities we now so easily buy and sell; we who wrote off our “historical debt”? Why are we dragging our past on our shoulders in some desperate attempt to form a historic continuity where sharp rupture would have been much more preferable? Why, finally, do we identify with the “State,” its history, its figures rather than with the victims, whose silent voices are left unheard? Guilt does matter.

If there is democracy to be had for us simple people, it can only come through the communion between the dead and the living, that ethical solidarity, that plea for forgiveness which can then form the foundation for and bring about the invention of a new politic. To break this silence is to break this wall; it is to listen to the dead and to that within the living which lies dead and buried. Not unlike in Germany which is still paying, which still hasn't ceased to ask itself “how could we have done it?” Had all those deprived, unheard, hushed, silenced people become our core and our sense then perhaps we simple Soviet people would not have experienced the harshness of the social reforms which, necessary though they were, had neither heart nor sympathy nor any sense of social responsibility. Perhaps now we would not find ourselves ruled by an ex-KGB agent, or indeed quarrelling about the double identity of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky---an ex-Komsomol activist turning oligarch, then turning against the ex-KGB president, jailed without trial nor any proof and sent to prison where so many people before him have found themselves. The very harshness of the ways those in power dealt with their previously much adulated “Soviet citizenry” is simply the continuation of the same old story. Why on earth should we have thought ourselves different?

I head of a young priest who, on arriving to one of the northern villages and learning that there was a whole graveyard of unknown corpses---the graveyard of Stalin's prisoners--gave a sermon. “That's a good one”---said the “local population”---“he gave last rites to the bones!”

Politics starts with ethics. Ethics demands the pain of recognition. Only then and there can a new cultural discourse be built. Russia is silent in a new kind of way, not having yet found its words, or letting them be unheard. But the tragedy is there, the voices are there, the legacy is there--and the new life trying to live up to that legacy is also there. And the message of forgiveness, and asking for forgiveness, is also there. This message is not just local--it belongs to the world.

And in the end I would like to read a poem written by the Russian poet Olga Sedakova to the French philosopher François Fedie. A poem immediately translated into many European

languages. A poem dealing with what can be called our “European identity,” even while coming from Russia. A poem about the message, and its messenger called “Angel from Reims”. It is the figure of a smiling angel on a wall of the cathedral in Reims, France, the cathedral in which a long-suffering French people led by Joan d’Arc crowned their first king in the 15th century.

The Angel of Reims

Are you there?—
 The angel is smiling
 I ask, though I know
 That you are surely there
 For I talk not just to anyone
 But to you
 A man whose heart shall never bare the treason
 Of your earthly King,
 Crowned here by his people
 And of that other Lord
 The King of Heavens, Our Lamb
 Dying in hope
 That you will hear me again;
 Again and again
 As every evening
 My name’s being told and sung
 Here, in the land of the splendid wheat
 And of the light vine,
 The crop and the grapes
 Drink in my sound—
 But nevertheless
 In this rose and crumbling stone
 Raising my arm
 That was broken off in the war
 Let me remind you:
 Are you there?

For plague, for hunger, for fire,
For invasions of men, for anger of Heavens?

All that is important, but it isn't the point.

That's not what I am to remind of
That wasn't the reason they've sent me.

I say

Are you

There

For the unbelievable happiness?
