

Natalia Pervukhina-Kamyshnikova

Leonid Chertkov in Search of Lost Time

This article follows life and writings of Leonid Chertkov (1933 – 2000), an archivist, poet, and political emigrant. From his initial interest in concealed literary facts during the Soviet years came his continuous preoccupation with forgotten and unappreciated authors. He singlehandedly introduced many authors of the early twentieth and eighteenth centuries to young Moscow and Leningrad poets of the 1950s and 1960s. At the peak of Khrushchev's thaw he was arrested and served five years in Gulag on the infamous article 58, actually for being the center of unofficial poetic circle referred to by his name, "Chertkov group." The experience enforced his perception at first, of his country, and after emigration, of the entire world as a form of a prison. My argument is based on the examination of his life in and out of Russia and the writings that he left.¹

"All cities are like prison exercise yards," wrote Leonid Chertkov (1933-2000) in "Astral Storm" ("Astralnaia buria"), his unpublished "writer's diary." It was 1987, the thirteenth year since his emigration to the free world from the Soviet Union, where he had served five years in the labor camp (1957 — 1962). The experience of prison still featured prominently in his vision of the world.

After 1980, Chertkov settled in Cologne, Germany, where on June 28, 2000, he died of a heart attack at the library desk. The death of an archivist and a poet, a wanderer and a hermit could not have happened in a more symbolic way. The library was his home away from home, the home that he had had to leave twenty-six years earlier, in 1974. Like many Russian intellectuals who found themselves in exile or had to emigrate, Chertkov involuntarily robbed his homeland of his literary talent and the unique gifts of a

¹ Archive of Leonid Chertkov was salvaged from destruction by Gabriel Superfin, an archivist at the Institute of Eastern Europe (Bremen). Chertkov did not make his will and after his sudden death Cologne municipality sent his archive for a temporary storage before discarding his papers. I had an honor and a pleasure to work in Bremen archive under the guidance of Superfin, who knew Chertkov for many years and whose help could not be appreciated enough. Chertkov's archive consists of a collection of his short stories, compiled by Russian poet and literary scholar Ivan Akhmetev (unpublished), typed manuscript of texts entitled by the author "Astralnaia Buria", and some personal documents, books, photographs, and a few letters. Fond 51/34 All translations from Russian are mine.

born enlightener. A literary scholar of extraordinary erudition, Chertkov had a special calling to impart his thoughts to and share his findings with like-minded people. After several years in the West he realized that emigration had not afforded him an audience that could appreciate his thoughts and knowledge. He turned to recording his insights into contemporary politics, social phenomena, and what he referred to as signs and signals from an “astral world.” Chertkov’s “Diary” gives an invaluable insight on the former and future interests of Russian intelligentsia, on what would remain relevant for them and what is to be lost.

I start with the history of what became known in Russian unofficial literary circles as “Chertkov’s group”: During 1952-56, several students of Foreign Language Institute began to get together to share their common passion for poetry. Galina Andreeva, Valentin Khromov, Stanislav Krasovitsky, and Andrei Sergeev² became the core of the group. They met in Andreeva’s tiny room in a communal apartment in Bronnaya Street.³ Leonid Chertkov was the informal but acknowledged leader of the circle. His knowledge of forgotten and unpublished authors became unique among his generation. He developed interest in forgotten periods of the Russian literature early in his youth. A desire to get access to the literary archives and books banned from the general circulation and hidden in the libraries’ storage areas brought him to the Library Institute.⁴ He was a bibliophile;

² About Chertkov group see: Andrei Sergeev. His autobiographical novel *The Stamp Album* (Albom dlia marok), for which he received Russian Booker Prize in 1996. *OMNIBUS*, Moskva, *NLO*, 1997: 288-320. Andrei Sergeev. *Stamp Album: a Collection of People, Things, Relationships and Words*. Moscow: Glas, Chicago, Northwestern UP, 2002. Also, Vladislav Kulakov “Mansarda s oknami na Zapad. Interviu s Andreev Sergeevym” in *Poeziia kak fakt. Stat’i o stikhakh*. M. *NLO*, 1999. Vladislav Kulakov, “Kak eto nachinalos’.” *Novyi mir*, 1994. Victor Kulle, Review on publication of Leonid Chertkov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, M. O.G.I., 2004, 112 pp. in *Novyi mir*, 2005:12. E. Lobkov, “Preodolenie eruditsii” *Zerkalo* 2006, 2, pp. 27-28. Also, Mikhail Aizenberg. “Underground vchera i segodnia”, *Znamia*, 1998:6. <http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/1998/6/krit.html>.

³ A room not shared with parents was a luxury that few young people could enjoy. Joseph Brodsky described the anxieties born from the necessity to share their personal space with parents. “Less than One” in *Less Than One. Selected Essays*. New York: 1986, 3-33, especially: 7, 14, 27. Also, “In a Room and a Half”, *ibid.*, 446-501.

⁴ Library Institute graduates had very low salaries and little chances for professional growth even by the Soviet standards. Mostly, young women composed students’ body. Depending on the State’s needs, different professions were held in high esteem: engineers in the 1930s, pilots in the 1940s, geologists in the 1950s, and physicists in the 1960s. The romanticized image of a profession in mass culture compensated for the unimpressive income. Librarians never enjoyed high social status. In 1952, Chertkov, a Jew, had no chance to be accepted in Foreign Language Institute. Fortunately, the Library Institute was for him a right place to be. It is necessary to note that Leonid Chertkov had no connection to ancient Russian gentry of the same name. There are several Jewish lines with the last name of Chertkov

he regularly visited used bookstores, delved into archives, copied manuscripts and took notes.⁵ He also had the urgent need to share his discoveries with like-minded friends.

Andreeva's room at the top floor of a pre-revolution apartment building faced the West. The visitors called it "Mansard facing the West," which had both a literal and a figurative meaning. The word "Mansard" became a moniker of the circle:

*"It was not for nothing that the Mansard looked to the West. We envisioned a normal society, the opposite of ours, over there."*⁶

Various forms of "hidden knowledge," from the mass culture of the West to the suppressed culture of the Russian past were an essential part of the group's spiritual resistance in the sterilized atmosphere of Soviet cultural politics.

A poetic bridge over the hiatus of time in Soviet culture.

An educator by vocation, Chertkov did not leave many poems but in most of them he went all the way in defiance of the barriers set by common Soviet caution and self-preservation. Chertkov was a militant non-conformist, and, if I may say so, a militant pacifist. In 1953, he wrote a three-poem cycle "The Salt of the Earth" (Sol' zemli), in which he carries to the extreme militaristic Romanticism, represented in poetry by Rudyard Kipling and his Soviet followers, such as Eduard Bagritsky (1895-1934), Nikolai Tikhonov (1896-1979), and Nikolai Aseev (1889-1963). In the poem he gives voice to unidentified soldiers of fortune, eager executioners, faceless participants in pointless military expeditions, ready also for their own senseless death. He parodied the violence they glorify and exposed the stark alienation of the willing killers. His short poem "Summation" (Itogi) written in 1953-54 brought him a "*real triumph in summer of*

and Chertok, derived from a town of Chortkov (Galicia), 1566. http://toldot.ru/urava/lnames/lnames_23054.html
and <http://giperborea.liveforums.ru/viewtopic.php?id=186>

⁵ Family stories were often a link with the past for a new generation. It is possible that Chertkov's distant relation to the ego-futurist poet of Odessa school Anatoly Fioletov who in 1918 was killed by bandits in Odessa, inspired Chertkov's interest in the marginal literary figures. His parents were also born in Odessa.

⁶ Sergeev, *Ibid.*, 292.

1955” among patrons of the only cocktail hall in Moscow, “a *Western oasis in the gray desert of the East.*”⁷

Sixty years after it was written, the poem reads not only as a dark fantasy about a longed-for destruction of the Communist capital. It still reveals the suppressed aggression that has accumulated in the Soviet and now Post–Soviet society and anticipates the failure of violent popular protest:

*А когда в родниках станет красной вода,
И не будет нигде неразрушенных зданий,
Мы возможно припомним, что эти года
Дали нам драгоценную злость ожиданий.*⁸

(When spring water turns red with blood, and no whole buildings are left, we will probably remember that the years gone by imparted precious anger of expectations to us.)

Chertkov’s early poetry has the energy of an inevitable and almost desirable finality. He envisions details of a future arrest, investigation, and execution by a firing squad. He looks forward to a civil war, or a variety of aggressive actions that would disrupt his desperate existence.

His poetry was permeated with premonitions of disaster and sense of danger. Long before his actual arrest, he had lived through the experience mentally. Similarly, in the confinement of the labor camp, he predicted his destiny as a peripatetic scholar. Then, as later, he was thinking about recurrent historical patterns, not directly connected with the specifics of Soviet or contemporary realities in general.

Thaw, and the subsequent freezing nights.

⁷ Sergeev, *ibid.*, 297.

⁸ Poems by Chertkov cited from his tiny collections *Ognepark*, Keln, 1987 and *Smalta*, Keln, 1997 (no pagination) His self-published *Ognepark* has an important author’s reminder applicable also to his prose writings: “we must not forget that the lyric “I” is not required to always reflect the personality of the author.”

Besides the well-researched “Khrushchev Thaw,”⁹ the Soviet Union had known a number of shorter periods when State control was relaxed. Contemporaries remembered those periods as real gasps of freedom specifically because they were not sponsored by the government. Rather, they resulted from a fundamental disruption of established order and consequent confusion among its rulers.¹⁰ One such short period happened after WWII, when demobilized military returned from Europe. The other “quiet thaw” came immediately after Stalin’s death in 1953. It is well known that the short-lived post-war period of relative laxity inspired the wave of terror that ended only with Stalin’s death. The young people of Chertkov’s circle viewed “Khrushchev Thaw” with disdain: it was bestowed on the people by the same government that was responsible for the atrocities it now condemned. The falsity of the familiar official parlance was a dead giveaway for these young poets, and they continued their withdrawal into a private world. They despised the officially permitted bravery of literary frondeurs like E. Yevtushenko and A. Voznesensky.

Andrei Sergeev writes about Chertkov's conviction that *«a sense of danger sharpens the vision of the contemporary and provides a measure of things, a clear semantic task. Contemporaneity is a sine qua non of any worthy poem.»*¹¹ Chertkov was defiantly reckless in comparison with the other poets of the group. For a poem written in 1953, about the future destruction of Kremlin, he would have been persecuted in any period of Russia’s history:

*И была последняя ночь режима,
И кто–то зачем–то поджег Москву,
И больше никем уже не хранимый,*

⁹ See, f. ex., V. M. Zubok *Zhivago’s Children: the last Russian intelligentsia* Harvard UP, 2009. Rosen, Margo Shohl. “The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry”, Ph. D. thesis, Columbia University, 2011.

¹⁰ Vladislav Kulakov. “Poeziia kak fakt” Interview with Valentin Khromov “My vseгда zanimalis’ tol’ko iskusstvom”, *NLO*, 1999. Nikita Krivoshein in an interview to Ivan Tolstoy “V letargicheskoi zone”: Pamiati Leonida Chertkova. Program of Ivan Tolstoy at radio Svoboda, 2000. www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24200437.html. Contrary to the previous period, in Russia of today, an emphasis on political neutrality has become a statement of support for the current Russian regime and its parlance. In “Esli by ne Kolya Shatrov” (If it was not for Kolya Shatrov), a 2011 documentary about a deceased poet Nikolai Shatrov (1929-1977), affiliated with Chertkov’s group, based on interview of survivors of the group, Galina Andreeva, Oleg Gritsenko, Nikolai Khromov, Shatrov’s widow and several of their contemporaries, Chertkov’s name has never been mentioned. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noo5NYkQHJU>

¹¹ Sergeev, *Ibid.*, 299.

Кремль наконец взлетел в синеву.

(...)

Ночь ушла, и трупы спокойно покрыли

Облезлый захламленный паранет,

И на кровавой кирпичной пыли

Обгоревший с углов, но знакомый портрет.

Где улыбка у глаз и в морщинках мелких,

И улыбка в изгибе губ и усов...

И сопливый ребенок, играющий стрелкой,

Секундной стрелкой Спасских часов.

(It was the last night of the regime, Someone for some reason set Moscow on fire, and no longer protected by anyone, Kremlin at last blew up into the blue sky. (...) The night passed, corpses quietly strewn, over the dilapidated and littered parapet, and the familiar portrait, burnt at corners, remained on a blood-stained dusty pavement, with his smiling eyes and thin lines in eye's corners, and with a smile in the curve of his lips and mustaches... And a snotty child plays with a second hand of the Savior tower clock.)

Chertkov had a strong premonition of his fate. Two years before his arrest, in 1955, he wrote a poem that testifies how intensely he imagined the plight of his arrested countrymen and how clearly he saw himself among them:

Вот и все. Последняя ночь уходит,

Я еще на свободе, хоть пуст кошелек.

Я могу говорить о кино, о погоде, —

А бумаги свои я вчера еще сжег.

Я уверен в себе. У меня хватит наглости

Прокурору смеяться в глаза,

Я не стану просить заседательской жалости

И найду, что в последнем слове сказать.

Наплевать. Я давно в летаргической зоне,

Мне на что-то надеяться было бы зря:

У меня цыганка прочла на ладони

Концентрационные лагеря.

А другие? Один в потемках читает.

Этот ходит и курит, и так же она.

Да и что там гадать, откуда я знаю.

Может, каждый вот так же стоит у окна.

И никто, наверно, не ждет перемены.

И опять синяком затекает восток,

И я вижу, как незаметный военный

Подшивает мне в папку последний листок.

(That is it. The last night is slipping away. I am still not imprisoned, but my wallet is empty. I can talk about films and about weather. Yesterday, I already burnt my archive. I am confident of myself. I'll have audacity to laugh to a prosecutor's face. I won't ask for the judges' compassion – I will find words for my final statement. I don't care. It's long since I am in lethargy. Any hope would be in vain: A Gipsy palm-reader saw concentration camps on my palm. The others? One is reading in semi-darkness, another is pacing the room smoking, she is doing the same. Why try to guess, how can I know. Perhaps each one of us is standing at the window as I am. And nobody expects any change. East bruises with red again, And I can see an officer stapling the last page in my folder.)

Thaw and Soviet military activities in 1956. Arrest and sentence.

Khrushchev's "Thaw" is usually referred to as a period roughly between the mid-50's and 1964. For a few intellectuals who saw a tragedy in the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, it was different.¹² According to the succinct formula of a member of a similar poetic circle from Leningrad, Vladimir Uflyand (1937-2007), the thaw "*lasted exactly as long as the Russian Revolution of 1917: in February 1956 Khrushchev denounced Stalin and on the 4th of November Soviet tanks were on the streets of Budapest.*"¹³ Uflyand refers to the period between the collapse of the Russian monarchy and the establishment of the provisional government in February 1917 and the Bolshevik takeover in October of the same year.

¹² Sergeev describes how he and his friends were crushed by the Hungarian events: "*He [Chertkov] was in the extreme of distress and spoke to me, or to himself, or into the wind: 'Just to have a chance to dance on the portrait! [Meaning the Party leader's NP]. Perhaps it would worth to give my life for it?'*" Sergeev, *Ibid.*, 322.

¹³ Mikhail Eremin, Vladimir Ufliand, Ilia.Kukulin, "Moguchaia piterskaia khvor'" *NLO*. 2005, 71. p. 376.

Simultaneously with its invasion into Hungary, the Soviet Union was involved in the Suez Crisis on behalf of Egypt. During the Suez Canal crisis, at a Library Institute meeting in support of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Chertkov snapped: “*Students should take exams instead of defending the pharaoh of Egypt.*”¹⁴

Two months later, on January 12, 1957, Leonid Chertkov was arrested and sentenced to 5 years under article 58.10 (Anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation), which he served in full in Dubrovlag, Mordovia. Tellingly, his sentence included no specific charges, yet the judge gave him a five-year term instead of the four years that the prosecutor requested. Chertkov was singled out from the others in the group because State Security unmistakably recognized him as “a center, an axis that had to be pulled out to get the circle to fall apart.”¹⁵

Dubrovlag was not a death camp, like Kolyma camps during Stalin’s Gulag. In comparison with forced labor-camps before and after Khrushchev’s thaw, the regime in the Mordovia camps was relatively bearable.¹⁶ Chertkov’s letters from the camp to Andrei Sergeev include concentrated literary reviews of his reading, discussions of Sergeev’s translations from Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, and Chertkov’s own attempts at translation of English and German poetry.¹⁷ Chertkov managed to issue two literary collections as a samizdat publication, *Troia* (December 1958) and *Piatirechie* (May 1959) -- one copy each.¹⁸

Chertkov distinguished between those who honorably deserved their sentence, conscientious opponents to the regime, and victims of Gulag who were accused for crimes that they never committed. He rejected victimization of the former, a small minority who received his respect; he looked upon the rest with unaffected concern. It

¹⁴ Sergeev, *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁵ N. Krivoshein in Ivan Tolstoy “V letargicheskoi zone. Pamiati Leonida Chertkova.” <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/OTB/2001/OBT.101001.asp>

¹⁶ V.P. Kuznetsov “Nas sblizila liubov’ k literature” *NLO* 2001, 47.

¹⁷ Letters to Sergeev (from the archive of Galina Muravieva, the widow of A. Sergeev).

¹⁸ The title “Piatirechie” refers to five people whose work made a collection: Mikhail Krasilnikov, Alexander Iaroshenko, Petr Antoniuk, Leonid Chertkov, Vladimir Kuznetsov; A. Iaroshenko, an artist from Leningrad, made its design. Kuznetsov, *ibid.* See also Vladimir Kuznetsov, “Istoriia odnoj kompanii” 1995, *Tynianovskii sbornik* vyp. 10, 1998, vyp.11, and <http://www.rvb.ru/np/publication/05supp/5-rechie/5-rechie.htm>

was important for him to see himself as a conscious enemy of the inhuman order of things, not the mindless victim of a state machine: “Leonid Andreev’s son was imprisoned not for ‘nothing at all.’ He wrote a novel about chekist officers – “Night Wanderers”. (Сын Леонида Андреева сидел не “ни за что”. Он написал роман о чекистах – “Странники ночи.”)¹⁹

For Chertkov, the camp experience was nevertheless agonizing. Tatiana Nikolskaia, his wife, writes: “He said that first three years in the camp were bearable. (...) only once he mentioned that appalling episodes also had happened, which better not to recall.”²⁰ It had a devastating effect on his fragile mental organization. As much as he had fantasized about future destruction and execution before his arrest, the reality of the camp trounced him. In the West, to the end of his days, his surroundings would seem pregnant with the sinister intrigues and ugliness he encountered in the prison zone.

Release to the “Big Zone.”

Chertkov’s time in the camp ended in January 1962. His incarceration meant that he did not witness events that had an enormous impact on the awakening of Soviet society: the World Festival of Youth in Moscow (1957), the first American exhibition (1959), Yury Gagarin’s journey into space (1961), and removal of Stalin’s corpse from Lenin’s tomb (1961). Pasternak’s Nobel award scandal (1958) and his death (1960) also happened while Chertkov was in the Mordovia camp.²¹

Chertkov nevertheless witnessed an important cultural and political event of the decade, namely the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich” (November, 1962). A short period followed during which the grip of censorship was loosened. Chertkov tried to pick up his life where it had been interrupted. For several months he worked in the Fundamental Library for the Humanities (INION)

¹⁹ Daniil Leonidovich Andreev (1906-1959), the author of *The Rose of the World. The Metaphilosophy of History* (Peace Church Challenge, 2015)), his main creation conceived and written during his incarceration in Vladimir Central Prison during 1947-1957. State Security confiscated and destroyed his early “novel about chekists” *Wanderers of Night (Stranniki nochi)* focused on the spiritual opposition to the Soviet regime and atheism but Andreev partially restored it after his release.

²⁰ Tatiana Nikolskaia. “Puteshestvennik, stavshii zatvornikom” (A Wanderer who became a Hermit) *NLO*, 2001, 47.

²¹ On that period see Vladislav Zubok *Zhivago’s Children The last Russian Intelligentsia*. Harvard UP, 2009.

and continued his research in state and private archives. His Moscow friends however noticed that Chertkov, once the epitome of energy, had somehow lost his verve.²² He moved to Leningrad, married Tatiana Nikolskaia, a young talented literary scholar, and found many old and new friends there.²³ After the marriage, his social life became even more intense. Nikolskaia cites Joseph Brodsky's verses, attached to a bottle of vodka, which the future Nobel laureate gave him as a birthday gift on December 14, 1969.

Любовь к Черткову Леониду

Есть наша форма бытия,

О чем народный судья

Не подавая, впрочем, виду –

Имел возможность догадаться,

Давая срок, что был не мал,

У нас он жизни отнимал.

(Love for Leonid Chertkov is our form of being. The judge might guess it, however, on the sly, when gave us prison time, taking it away from our lives.)²⁴

The roads that they were to choose.

A distinct change in the very spirit of the times happened in the early 1970s. For the first time since the mid-20s, emigration from the USSR became a real option, albeit only for Jews or those whom KGB chose to consider as such. “To leave or not to leave” became the central theme of private discussions among many within the intelligentsia. For some it was not a matter of choice but an alternative to a new prison term. This was the case for Chertkov.

For people who could not accept the Soviet system, there were various modes of escape: For some emigration was an option; for the less fortunate, the Gulag and/or

²² <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/OTB/2001/OBT.101001.asp>

²³ Among people with whom Chertkov became intimately connected in Leningrad, Tatiana Nikolskaia mentions Akhmatova's “orphans”: Joseph Brodsky, Evgeny Rein, Anatoly Neiman, and Dmitry Bobyshev; members of the “philological school” (Vladimir Ufliand, Mikhail Eremin, Leonid Vinogradov, Sergei Kulle), and Alexej Khvostenko. Chertkov and Konstantin Azadovsky wrote together an article about Rilke in Russia. Nikolskaia and Chertkov became friends with Sergei Dovlatov and Lev Losev. They also had friends among older generation, like Ekaterina Konstantinovna, widow of Benedikt Livshits, and Alexandra Ivanovna Vaginova. Nikolskaia, *Ibid*.

²⁴ Nikolskaia, *NLO* 2001, 47.

expulsion from the country. But there was also a niche for inner emigration, and in that niche a chance to escape into the “transcendental,” into things beyond this world. Formal religion became a lifeline for some; for others, it was the quest for esoteric knowledge. Any deviation from the government-imposed ideology was at best suspicious, and often persecuted – hence, for some non-materialistic world view was especially attractive. Thus, the occult, Buddhism, and Masonic beliefs answered Chertkov’s fascination with hidden wisdom and disputable teachings. The idea of certain higher powers and their influence over human fate came natural to him.

Chertkov, oversensitive and deeply vulnerable, felt doomed in the atmosphere of despondency and threat of new repressions spread in the 1970. In May 1974, Chertkov left his homeland for good; only his father, Natan Aleksandrovich Chertkov, Tanya Nikolskaia, Konstantin Azadovsky, and Lev Turchinsky saw him off at the airport.²⁵

Another Life and Personality Transformations

The Russian mythological consciousness, shaped by centuries of state-imposed isolation, viewed emigration as a step towards the Otherworld. The West loomed as an abode of the dead, be it an underworld or heaven. Crossing the border without possibility to return was a kind of a death experience for a Soviet escapee. They did not expect ever to return and ever to see their family or friends again. Indeed, Chertkov’s father died at the end of the same year and the son could not attend his funeral.

Besides objective factors, such as a specific historical situation, knowledge of foreign languages, profession, and age, an emigrant’s personality plays a significant role in his chances to prosper and survive psychologically in a foreign country. People who knew Chertkov intimately at the different stages of his life remembered his intense and uncompromising personality. Tatiana Nikolskaya writes about his difficult character. He took offense easily and would remember a perceived injustice for a long time. There are stories of fights provoked by an unpleasant remark or an insult from a stranger. Nikita Krivoshein, who knew him in Moscow before they met again in Dubrovlag, recalled: *“Chertkov had the highest degree of egocentricity, which is not the same as egoism. (...) He*

²⁵ Konstantin Azadivskij “O ‘strannom russkom’: Leonid Chertkov”
<http://www.guelman.ru/slava/nrk/nrk5/45.html>

deeply rejected himself and had disdain for his own undeniable talent. He tried to give up writing poetry and was even ashamed of himself. That is what I mean by self-rejection.”²⁶

Clearly, Chertkov’s demand for the highest professional and ethical standards in combination with his egocentrism and misanthropy did not make him a good candidate for success in a foreign land.

Chertkov was forty-one when he left Soviet Union. His reputation among Russian intellectuals was very high. He had published over a hundred articles in the *Literary Encyclopaedia* mostly about forgotten or unmentionable authors, sometimes under a pseudonym. Chertkov’s article on Vladimir Nabokov (in collaboration with Oleg Mikhailov²⁷) appeared in the *Literary Encyclopaedia* (1968, v.5), the first mention of Nabokov in an academic Soviet publication. One of his last articles in the *Literary Encyclopaedia* written in the Soviet Union was the article about Varlam Shalamov.²⁸ In Vienna, Wolfgang Kozak was the one scholar able to appreciate the value of Chertkov’s erudition. He helped him to publish collection of poetry by Konstantin Vaginov (1982) and Vladimir Narbut (1983)²⁹. Kozak also recommended Chertkov for a teaching position at the University of Nanterre.

In France, in the academia of the 1970s, Chertkov’s phenomenal erudition in Russian literature could not be appreciated and his political views were not welcome. Like many Russian political émigrés before and after him, he expressed his anti-communist and “politically incorrect” views with uncomfortable directness. Students disliked him. The feeling was mutual. Nor could he find much camaraderie in the trenches with other political emigrants. In a foreign land, making new friends can be

²⁶ Krivoshein, <http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/OTB/2001/OBT.101001.asp>

²⁷ The encyclopedia article on Vladimir Nabokov was co-signed by Oleg Mikhailov (1932-2013), Soviet author and literary critic of nationalistic linking, author of *Literatura Russkogo Zarubezhia (1920 – 1940)*, Moscow, Nasledie: 1993. He perished in his house fire in Peredelkino. His valuable archive including correspondence of Ivan Bunin and Marina Tsvetaeva among them, perished with him.

²⁸ Chertkov met Varlam Shalamov before his arrest in 1957. Later, he had searched old newspapers for Shalamov’s early publications and wrote an article about Shalamov in *Literary Encyclopaedia* (v.8) Shalamov answered Chertkov’s questions concerning that article in his letter of December 2, 1973. Varlam Shalamov. *Sobranie sochinenij v shesti tomakh*, Moscow, Terra: 2005, pp. 584-586.

²⁹ See: Iliia Kukulin “Istoriia pogranichnogo iazyka. Vladimir Narbut, Leonid Chertkov i kontrkulturaia funktsiia”. *NLO* 2005:72.

difficult even for younger people or for those with a more amiable character than Chertkov.

During his first years in the West, Chertkov enjoyed many opportunities barred to Soviet people. His peripatetic life style took him all over Europe. He also read books that did not cross over the border into the Soviet Union. By degrees, previously buried personality traits and ideas began to dominate his consciousness. His sociability began to diminish. Roman Timenchik wrote in Memoriam, after Chertkov's death: "He felt a permanent eye following his back making his life a simulacra of his favorite Nabokovian motive of stepping into an adjacent metaphysical dimension, which we habitually call a persecution mania." And he used to find confirmations to his insights. Timenchik pointed to such confirmation in his short story "Heaven Orchestra" (1981), in which Chertkov created a memorial to his friend and prominent dissident Andrey Amalrik, who was killed in a bizarre and suspicious car crash: "*Sunny Andrei carelessly revealed himself to dark element, and it struck him with impunity around midnight.*"³⁰ Timenchik quotes from Leonid's letter smuggled by a friend from France to the Soviet Union so that "Aesopian language" could be avoided: "*Indeed, life here is pretty disgusting. The worst thing is that stoolies from our appreciative Fatherland are in abundance here. It is one of the difficulties of the local life. My dream is to part with Slavistics, but where can I go? So that's that. And actually over the years I encountered with such striking examples of human baseness about which we somehow disremembered mingling in a narrow circle of scholars. Some are just like characters from gothic novels. I used to suffer for the lack of company, and now I do not want even to see anyone. Well, it is difficult to describe all that. А вообще жить очень тошно. Самое ужасное, что все вокруг напиговано стукачами и кое-чем похуже. Да-да, из благодарного отечества. Тоже одна из трудностей тутошней жизни. Моя мечта - разделаться со славистикой, но куда же еще податься? Так-то вот. И вообще столкнулся за эти годы с такими поразительными образцами человеческой низости, о которых мы, варясь в узком кругу эрудитов, как-то и подзабыли. Прямо персонажи каких-то готических романов. Раньше я страдал без общения, а теперь и видеть никого не хочу. Да всего и не расскажешь*".³¹ He became "carping, wary, and skeptical", Timenchik remembered.

³⁰ Roman Timenchik. In memoriam. *NLO* 2001:47

³¹ Ibid.

Significantly, that estrangement from people whom he knew for many years coincided with changes in his homeland. He did not share the optimistic hopes that Russian *perestroika* brought to liberal-minded Russian intellectuals. The idealized West of his youth confronted him with its alien and often ugly side: He was repelled by the power of marketing, disgusted by mindless consumerism, and saw a mortal danger to civilization in the smug hypocrisy of political correctness:

“Devil whose name is ‘pleasure’.” Дьявол, имя которому «приятно». («Большой цейтнот», 1986).

“If you move to the consumption society, be prepared for the fact that they're ready to consume you as well. Если вы переселяетесь в общество потребления, будьте готовы к тому, что будут готовы употребить и вас». («Ожившие куклы и восковые фигуры», 1987)

“the trade of colored disguised as ‘friendship of peoples’ торгвая цветным мясом под видом дружбы народов (Большой цейтнот, 1986).

In the Soviet Union, in the second half of the 1980s, everything associated with the Western lifestyle had maintained the appeal of forbidden fruit. By the turn of the millennium, however, disillusionment with the West, from which Russian style capitalism had adopted the worst, had spread among most of the Russian public. Chertkov was ahead of his time.

His life trajectory had been moving from a “little zone” of his labor camp to a bigger one, the entire Soviet Union separated from the world by the Iron Curtain; and he ultimately felt that the globe itself was a barb wired zone. Allusions to concentration camps pop up now and then:

“exercise yards of German (foreign) cities, where TV towers are like camp’s watch towers. прогулочные дворники германских [иностранных] городов, где телевизионные башни похожи на лагерные вышки”.

Chertkov’s exile did not give him any respite because his Russian awareness of inevitable catastrophe expanded to the entire world. For Chertkov, emigration was not a choice, not even an exile, but an accident. People are moved by fear, he contended, and any step can lead to disaster. The following exchange illustrates his ironic view of the «fatal» step:

- For what did you leave? - It was a fad.

- *Why did you leave? - Out of fear.*
- *And why did you stay? - Out of fear*
А вы зачем уехали? — За модой.
А вы почему вы уехали? – От страху.
А вы почему остались? – От страху.

There is not a single nostalgic note in his “writer's diary.” Familiar ghosts from the past appear to him in the streets, he recognizes old Russian acquaintances, often deceased, among the foreign crowds; but these intrusive visitations only reinforce his sense of his vulnerability. In 1979, Chertkov had heart surgery and lost his job; since then he lived on social support and resumed his research and writing. He was aware that his immersion into dialogue with his own double was unhealthy:

Chatting, for the lack of other interlocutors, with one's own 'black box' finally weakens the nervous system... It is not a secret, of course, for specialists. As everything, in fact, that is happening to people of this ilk.”

Болтовня за отсутствием других собеседников с собственным “черным ящиком” в конце концов нервную систему расшатывает. Что для специалистов разумеется не секрет. Как впрочем и все, что с нашим братом происходит.

During the 1990s this “weakening of the nervous system” worsened dramatically. Chertkov blocked off almost all contact with friends and acquaintances. In 1997, he wrote to Andrei Sergeev about his deteriorating health and about his work on short stories.³² In July 2000 he died. His prose remains unpublished to this day.

The Astral Storm. “The Writer's Diary”

Chertkov approached his mid-50s in a fragile physical and mental condition. The conflict between his sharp mind and his traumatized psyche tormented him. Years in the West afforded many observations. He could analyze everyday life, political fights, and social norms in the West both as a direct observer and, simultaneously, through the lens of his Soviet experience. Chertkov's need to share his thoughts and knowledge remained intact,

³² Ivan Akhmetiev prepared Chertkov's short stories for publication but up to now could not find a publisher. From our correspondence - NP.

but the audiences that could appreciate his newly acquired wisdom had changed, or disappeared entirely. Before he retracted unobtrusively into utter isolation he worked intensively on a manuscript that he called *The Astral Storm*. In a letter from October 30, 1987 he wrote: “During the last few years I have been writing a kind of ‘Diary of a Writer,’ but infinitely more laconic and without any attempt at self-commentary.”³³ Each entry of the “Diary” is a line in dialogue with an imaginary interlocutor who shares the author’s frame of reference.

Since his younger years, Chertkov had a leaning toward beliefs in a relationship between tangible reality and the transcendental. This was a part of his desire to penetrate the opaque veil that separated Soviet people from prohibited knowledge, be it knowledge of the Russian past or of the Western present, leading to his reading in theosophy and the history of Freemasonry. In the West, Chertkov sifted through books by the spiritual teacher of “esoteric Christianity” Gurdjieff (1872-1949) and through books on Buddhism, and these readings added to his fascination with and aversion to all self-selective and secret associations.

He defines his own creative persona:

The fourth dimension is the invisible, yet non-transparent curtain that separates us from the otherworld. But art grasps the essence of nature in moments of its epiphany, when the final border between artistic manifestation and medical diagnosis is erased. Четвертое измерение — невидимый, но и непрозрачный занавес, отделяющий нас от иного мира. Но искусство — это улавливание природы в наиболее вдохновенные ее моменты. (...) Когда стиралась последняя грань между художественным манифестом и медицинским диагнозом. («Обуздание стихий», 1986).

The sensitivity to injustice that caused Chertkov’s unmasked hostility to the Soviet regime was now transformed into a belief in the confluence of evil forces or foul spirits working in the world. He viewed the corruption of institutions, from churches and banks to elite literary societies intimately tied to the state security, as the products of a universal force. His “diary” became an experiment in theodicy. The title “Astral Storm” reflects his vision of the transcendental nature of malicious forces constantly participating in human life and relentlessly struggling with “angels”, the only defensive force on the

³³ From the archive of Galina Muravieva.

side of man. His world became a place of betrayal and danger, where one can beg for relief only from the Courts of Heaven. Sardonic advice belongs to this kafkaesque Court: *We are no longer able to assist you. Turn to Astral. Ничем помочь уже не можем. Обратитесь в астрал.*

The Astral Storm

The manuscript of *The Astral Storm* consists of 18 complete texts, or chapters, each of 15 or 16 pages closely typed, with every entry starting on a new line, sometimes in lowercase letter. Fifteen texts are dated to 1987, three to 1986. There are also two texts dated by May, 1988 one page each, and three pages from May 1999. Every one of twenty-one texts has a title that implies a unity within the text. They convey the author's preoccupations with several obsessive ideas: unity and continuity of time; dependence of earthly events on infinite factors, particularly on forces mostly hostile to humans; historical unfairness to smaller talents, conspiracy of sinister powers, represented by governmental organizations united with the state security and international banks. Preoccupation with the "little ones of literary history, rooted in Chertkov's intrinsic democratism and instinctive opposition to all kinds of hierarchy and authorities" was a fundamental trait of his personality.³⁴

Apparently, the image of evil spirits controlling earthly life went back to his Soviet experience, especially to his conviction in the unity of the Gulag (innumerable camp zones) and the organization of life outside, within the borders of the Soviet State ('big zone'). The title of his short story collection, *Big Satan Zone*, never published in full, encapsulates his perception of the world reflected in *The Astral Storm*. The main difficulty in discussing Chertkov "Diary" is its use of almost coded language. Based on a vast number of historical, literary, and cultural allusions Chertkov's texts

³⁴ See interview with Timenchik "Когда человек хочет записаться на нашу кафедру, мы с ним проводим такие же беседы, как раввин с желающим пройти гиюр": <http://old2.booknik.ru/context/all/kogda-chelovek-hochet-zapisatsya-na-nashu-kafedru-my-s-nim-provodim-takie-je-besedy-kak-ravvin-s-jel>

deserve such an attempt. Evgeny Lobkov wrote about poets of Chertkov's circle: "It was a common feature for poets of Chertkov group – the need for a commentator."³⁵

Although it has no perceptible metrical pattern to speak of, and certainly is not rhymed, Chertkov's texts hypnotize the reader with its poetic intensity and overbearing power. The energy of the text derives from the density of juxtapositions of philosophical ideas, invented dramatic dialogues, brief records of facts, associations, and sarcastic, even sardonic statements and puns. It is possible to select a number of subjects that figure most prominently, but it is necessary to trace these through all of the "chapters" to notice the author's sometimes constant, sometimes altered treatment of the same topic.

My understanding is that in the *Astral Storm*, the author searches for a new genre. On one of the typed written manuscript he scribbled: "ragged times, ragged text." I think that the *Astral Storm* was Chertkov's attempt to create literary text corresponding to his understanding of ragged times.

At first reading, his frequent references to anonymous "they," "them," "ghosts," "spirits and angels" appear to correlate to Chertkov's hermetic life in the last decade of his life, presumably in the state of clinical depression, possibly even in a paranoid form.³⁶ After reading his prose more closely it becomes obvious that his attribution of the world evils to transcendental forces is rather a figure of speech, a literary trope that seeks to raise an alarm about the condition of the contemporary world. The very structure of Chertkov's prose reflects his confidence in the interconnections between phenomena, both big and small. In any given paragraph, he may start with a discussion of the fall of the Roman Empire, share his thoughts about a particular Russian poet, throw in some dirty puns, and then, apropos of nothing, observe that every age is full of the artifacts of ages gone by.

Chertkov's *Astral Storm* is indeed a message to the author's double, or to his counterpart from the future. He apparently believes that our world is hopelessly corrupt and needs to be stirred up to face an inevitable but unidentifiable catastrophe ahead. The sense of urgency is fused with lack of hope. He wrote for a future "plagiarist," as he

³⁵ Evgeny Lobkov "Poet dlia proizvoditel'ia", *Zerkalo*, 2008:31.

³⁶ Contrary to other memoirists, Marietta Chudakova found Chertkov quite friendly and an engaging scholar to talk when she visited him in Cologne short before his death. She was the last person from Russia who saw Chertkov. Nikolskaya, *Ibid*.

called all authors who, in his view, “plagiarised” the ideas and feelings already expressed in the past. That is why he avoids any clarifications of his puns, hidden quotes, and countless reference to philosophical ideas, and political events, past and present. He writes down his thoughts like headlines of presumed articles, or expresses ideas, which stimulate further thinking. His texts require hermeneutic reading to expose a profound thought in a short line, to discern a promising observation in a scribble, or to register a fascinating historical fact often interspersed with appalling homophobic philippic and slapstick jokes.

As much as he and his young friends loathed the Soviet system, the social atmosphere in the post-Stalin Soviet Union did not destroy all hope for the possibility of change. Chertkov contended that living with a sense of omnipresent danger stimulated his will to resist and gave him his creative impulse. A narrow flow of cultural news from the West had stirred their imagination but did not provide enough knowledge of its problems and conflicts. After twelve years in Europe, Chertkov’s reactions to the realities of Europe were similar to that of many other Russian political emigrants in the past. Their exaggerated expectations of the European spirit of freedom led them to disappointment with what they considered the smug contentment of European bourgeoisie in the 19th century³⁷ and the universal consumerism at the end of the 20th. Chertkov saw in consumerism a leading form of conformity and materialism.

Now he had a foreboding of an impending metaphysical catastrophe that would be fatal. He referred metaphorically to our Earth as a ship in the ocean of infinity. A multitude of evil forces and benevolent «angels» are entangled in permanent battle over our planet destiny. Unidentified evil forces constantly threaten human integrity and even their life by interfering in its minute details. Chertkov attributed his own misfortunes to their nefarious influence. The use of spiritual metaphors is a part of his artistic manifesto. A thin borderline between genius and insanity, a fundamental idea of Romanticism and Symbolism, determined Chertkov’s views on art.

Chertkov was terrified and disgusted by perceived manipulations perpetrated by all kind of cheaters, imposters, and fakes, by those whom he calls “sharpies.” Here are

³⁷ See writings by Alexander Herzen (1812-1870), Vladimir Pecherin (1807-1885), and Alexander Zinoviev (1922-2006), most prominent among many Wersternizers, who found the smug contentment of European bourgeoisie, and later American middle class, alien to their Russian less materialistic self-identity.

some titles of his texts: "Shortage of time" (*Большой цейтнот*), "Taming of the elements" (*Обуздание стихий*), "Harmonization of chaos" (*Гармонизация хаоса*), "Silence of the dirty sea" (*Молчание грязного моря*), "Knights in foxskin" (*Рыцари в лисьих шкурах*), "This world" (*Мир сей*), "Interference. And the gaps" (*Помехи. И прорехи*), "Sharpies" (*Шулера*), "Animated dolls and wax effigies" (*Ожившие куклы и восковые фигуры*), and his last one, dated 1999, "Story of good intentions" (*Рассказ о добрых намерениях*).

Chertkov infers that civilization, understood as the opposite of chaos, was doomed by the conspiracy between astral malevolent forces and their authoritative agents on earth. His "writer's diary" records examples of political and social processes that were supposed to support his ostensibly sick vision of world events. He tries to pinpoint signs that indicate how civilization is threatened by advancing chaos. Chertkov's vocabulary of conspiracy and constant references to mysterious powers presaged the superficially similar and less self-aware obsessions in Russia today. In the 21st century, the Russian mind has been conquered by conspiracy theories and fear of mortal dangers from the outside world. According to a recent survey, almost half of Russian citizens (45%) believe in the existence of a so-called "world government" seeking to control the planet.³⁸ Belief in mysterious powers against which the individual is helpless is as old as the world but in contemporary Russia they flourish profusely thanks to the clash between the society's experience of life under tight control of State Security and the variety of new and controversial concepts and practices that arrived from a more open world after the 1990s. Chertkov experienced a comparable shock in the early 1970s. It turned out that mere rejection of communist ideology and the Soviet system was not enough to embrace the diversity of Western lifestyles.

³⁸ Survey conducted on August 23 – 24, 2014, by All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), <http://avmalgin.livejournal.com/4895452.html> See also: Leonid Fishman "O dvukh sekuliarnykh eresakh" *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 2008:3 (59) http://bg.ru/society/a_vlasti_skryvayut-6210/http://communitarian.ru/novosti/finansy/teoriya_zagovora_ili_kak_rotshildy_i_rokfellery_rossiyu_delili_04082014/http://chipstone.livejournal.com/741751 http://thedailybanter.com/2014/01/russian-youth-poll-shows-hitler-more-popular-than-vladimir-putin/http://censor.net.ua/forum/342042/gitler_stal_populyarnym_v_rossiihttp://ru.krymr.com/content/article/27018942.htmlhttp://www.e-reading.club/bookreader.php/1035677/Dneprovskiy_-_Chelovek-Simvol._ch._2._Adolf_Gitler.htmlhttp://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2640864.html

Aside from the intense anxiety deriving from a lack of control over anything that was happening in the world, Chertkov in his “Diary” refers to numerous problems that I can only briefly outline here. Although he never belonged to a specific religious confession Chertkov felt the presence of the Otherworld. In August Strindberg (1849-1912), who apart from his literary achievements was engaged in the study of the occult, Chertkov found authoritative support for his perception of a universal order: “*Strindberg has scientifically proven the existence of supernatural forces and, contingently speaking, of hell.*”³⁹ His intense thinking about afterlife and the Otherworld goes along with mostly critical, at times even sardonic remarks on all formal religions and pseudo-religious parlance of the age:

Synagogue of Satan – Jews not believing in Adonai. Синагога Сатаны – евреи не верующие в Адонаи.

Jewish history makes one begin to doubt in Yahweh’s nationality. Was he indeed a Jew? Or a sort of Herod? He saves a number of them, but that is it. And for what? Spiritual Israel is the chief, but its priesthood is regular yid.

История евреев заставляет усомниться в национальности Иеговы. Точно ли он был евреем? Или вроде Ирода? Он их в каком-то количестве спасает, но и только. И для чего? Духовный Израиль – верховный хозяин, но в нем иереи – простые евреи. (“ОЖИВШИЕ куклы и восковые фигуры,” 1987)

Christianity:

Christianity is a likbez of Judaism.⁴⁰ Христианство ликбез иудаизма.

The Protestant church is interesting for its albeit timid position on life-building, for overcoming the crown of martyrdom worn solemnly by Catholicism and partially by Orthodoxy.

Протестантская церковь интересна своей хотя и боязливой установкой на жизнестроительство, преодолением торжественно носимого мученического венца католичества и отчасти православия.

In monasteries the evil spirit is much stronger than in the world. Black monasticism. There are many creeds in the world, but actually only one is enough for man – belief in one’s own strength (belief in himself). Monotheism is not a whim, but a working hypothesis.

³⁹ Tatiana Nikolskaya mentions that Chertkov was working on a book about occult in European literature. Nikolskaya, Ibid.

⁴⁰Likbez (an acronym for the "Extraordinary Commission for the Liquidation of Illiteracy")

В монастырях нечистый дух куда сильнее, чем в миру. Черное монашество. На свете много вер, но человеку в сущности достаточно одной – в свои силы. Монотеизм не блажь, а рабочая гипотеза.

Any forms of repression or freedom deprivation brings to Chertkov's mind allusions to his experience of captivity and suffering.

Karma – is a prosecution after death. Карма – судебное преследование после смерти.

Priests announcing still a mindless creature possessed by original sin, mutilating (circumcising) it. Священники, объявляющие ещё бессмысленное существо одержимым первородным грехом, уродующие (обрезающие) его.

Secret police in cassocks. Тайная полиция в рясах.

Feeding with spiritual henbane. О кормление духовной беленой.

Chertkov's deferential references to Christ make a significant exception in his obsession with theodicy. He disparagingly mentions gods of the Hindu, Greek, Persian, and Norse pantheons. Jehovah, "a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents" terrifies him. They are all triumphant gods, indifferent to petty human concerns. Like many among intelligentsia of his generation Chertkov drew his ideas about religion from Russian classic literature and from writing of Russian philosophers of the early 20th century. It is therefore not surprising that his theological reflections were stereotyped, focused more on his aversion to absolute authority than on the longing for salvation. It is not Christianity as a creed, but the image of the anguished Jesus Christ, that Chertkov sets apart. One of the entries reads:

Permanently. I pray to Christ, but to a different one. Постоянно. Я молюсь Христу, но другому. THEY either rule the world and do as they please, or they are down here and also do what they want. Gods dancing on our bones – Shiva, Durga, Jehovah, Dionysus, Zarathustra, Loki. Only Jesus [unfortunately] wasn't able to dance.

ОНИ или правят миром и делают, что хотят, или находятся внизу, чтобы тоже делать, что хотят. Танцующие на наших костях боги – Шива, Дурга, Иегова, Дионис, Заратустра, Локи. Один [к несчастью] Христос не умел танцевать. ("Большой цейтнот")

Chertkov's philosophical, historical, ethical, and political views are tightly intertwined. It is difficult to discuss one aspect in isolation from the others. Perception of the unity of time was at the core of his personality, whence, since his earliest youth, came his

obsession with history. One of the entries formulates this succinctly: “*Time is one homogeneous whole; past and future constantly intervenes.*”

His fascination with second and third tier of literary figures and their art was partially a result of his sense of historical injustice: “*To write is equal to spiritualism, because any writer plagiarizes the dead.*” And again: “*The past can protect or destroy the present, the present plagiarizes the past.*” Citing a trendy cliché, he uncovers its hidden meaning: “*Manuscripts do not burn, they reincarnate.*”

Рукописи не горят, они переходят на тот свет и оттуда вновь томят прежних и новых авторов, и вновь передают сюда в виде повторов, совпадений, плагиатов.(«Выход из квадрата», 87)

Here, indeed, Chertkov sides with victims of time’s temporal flow, with authors who can be exploited metaphysically. He also vents his indignation at how Soviet functionaries successfully erased the Soviet past from the memory of coming generations:

God with astonishing benevolence grants additional tens of prosperous years to old bastards, who had poisoned the century, so that they could put historical and moral make-up on their atrocities. Бог с поразительной снисходительностью даёт десятки благополучнейших лет старым мерзавцам, отравившим все столетие, для того, чтобы они навели историческую и моральную косметику на свои пакости. («Поцелуй пизду», 1987.)

Hypocrisy and the “big lie” had always been the foundation of Soviet propaganda. In the country where ethnic deportations and ethnic cleansing had destroyed the lives of millions, the idea of “friendship of peoples” became a new language of colonization. Chertkov projects Soviet deceptive practice into the Western rhetoric of ethnic diversity: *Nothing has corrupted humankind as much as the propaganda of friendship between peoples (alas!). Ничто так не развратило человечество, как пропаганда дружбы между народами (увы!)* (“Большой цейтнот”, 1986)

Imagined dialogues and fictional polls are a part of his numerous commentaries on history and on discussions of the current state of affairs. Some of his views could then,

in the second half of the 1980s, seem exaggerated. Yet the tendencies he noticed are snowballing in the Russian Federation of today.⁴¹

There are the results of a recent poll in Russia:

— *“Whom would you like to see as the leader of the USSR and the “progressive mankind” — Results: 40% – Stalin; 40% - Hitler; 20% Both, Stalin and Hitler.*

— *All right, said someone. Whoever would be better, Stalin or Hitler, both of them are much better than the contemporary intelligentsia.*

Результаты опроса – “Кого бы вы хотели видеть во главе СССР и “прогрессивного человечества”?

40% Сталина

40% Гитлера

20% Сталина и Гитлера

Ну, хорошо, сказал кто-то. Кто бы ни был лучше — Сталин или Гитлер, оба они значительно лучше современной интеллигенции.

Chertkov doggedly mocks and despises the contemporary intelligentsia, both Russian and Western. The conformism of the Soviet intelligentsia should not be exonerated but can be explained by years of terror. He blames European intellectuals for their alleged failure to see and fight the evil, thus blessing it with their intellectual authority. And in both groups he sees hypocrisy and a similar fear of personal discomfort.

For Chertkov politics and the universal human condition are fused into one. His apocalyptic premonitions are vindicated in various trends in the contemporary world, from political machinations and corporate systems to ideological rigidity and psychological relativism. His favorite arguments are mostly expressed in a form of sardonic paradox that is supposed to be understood by an “alter ego” or arrest the attention of an imagined reader. The entries below are almost randomly chosen from several chapters of *Astral Storm*.

⁴¹ <http://rt.com/politics/north-russian-republic-sakha-yakutiya-988/>,
<http://rt.com/politics/stalin-bus-wv2-stalingrad-138/>

<http://rt.com/politics/stalin-birthday-communists-ussr-545/>
<http://thedailybanter.com/2014/01/russian-youth-poll-shows-hitler-more-popular-than-vladimir-putin/>
http://censor.net.ua/forum/342042/gitler_stal_populyarnym_v_rossii
<http://ru.krymr.com/content/article/27018942.html>
http://www.e-reading.club/bookreader.php/1035677/Dneprovskiy_-_Chelovek-Simvol._ch._2._Adolf_Gitler.html

An old progressive moron is an ever-rare role and well remunerated.

Старый прогрессивный дурак – ампула всё более редкое и всё лучше оплачиваемое.

The road to new hybrids – Red fascism, Christian fascism, and Jewish fascism goes through oceans of blood and filth. Новые гибриды – красный фашизм, христианский фашизм, еврейский фашизм – к которым путь через кровавые и грязные моря.

The confusion with the superior race happened also because it actually turned out to be an ideology of athletes. Those who were coached to set records, but not procreate, and organize competitions, not the social life. After the Spanish training and the Berlin Olympics, they somehow did not know what else to do and took in a record forced marches.

Конфуз с высшей расой вышел еще и потому, что это в общем оказалось идеологией спортсменов. Которые были выдрессированы производить рекорды, а не потомство и устраивали соревнования, а не социальную жизнь. Проведя испанскую тренировку и берлинскую олимпиаду, они как-то не знали, что уже делать и взялись за рекордные марш-броски.

Finlandization⁴² and the World Revolution block each other.

Финляндизация и мировая революция блокируют друг друга.

Political, cultural and sexual revolutions are all parts of revolution in science and technology.

Политическая, культурная и сексуальные революции – части научно-технической

In contemporary society candidates for extermination exterminate each other – it is blessing in disguise.

Нет худа без добра современного общества – кандидаты на уничтожение находят друг друга.

“Everything is allowed”⁴³ that’s what Revolution is. “Все дозволено” – это и есть революция.

Law of the Tower of Babel – Cyclopean edifices usually bring civilization to an end.

Закон вавилонской башни – циклопические постройки обычно завершают цивилизацию.

Chertkov considers media to be the most destructive power due to its capacity to create deceitful reality and its massive use of propaganda and counterpropaganda. In his view, deceit and fraud are the stage-set in the theater of life.

Ideastraps, ideadistributors, ideasimplants, ideasjamming.

⁴² Finlandization here meaning a state conformity with the elements of Socialist economy and politics in attempt to preserve its autonomy from the dominating totalitarian states.

⁴³ “Everything is allowed”, Ivan Karamazov’s idea “если Бога нет, то все позволено” from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky.

*Идеиулавливатели, идеираспространители, идеивнушители и идеиглушители.
Our time has proven that Pyrrhic victories are the most suitable results for both fighting
side. Наше время доказало, что Пирровы победы являются наиболее
устраивающими борющиеся стороны результатами.
Yes, we ourselves have long realized that it is a comedy, but what a terrible comedy, and
how easily and casually it is played!
Да мы и сами давно поняли, что это комедия, но какая ужасная комедия и как
легко и непринужденно ее играют!
Age of information technology or to put it simply - the police century.
Век информатики или попросту говоря – полицейский век.*

Many of his sayings formulated in the late 1980s became common places in the media of today. Chertkov's vision of democracy derived from his concern for the individual; that is why his anti-globalism reflects his inherent fear for the fate of the specific and unordinary.

*So what is worse – the Church, free press ('media is Bobok'), TV, or police? Что хуже –
церковь, свободная пресса ("Бобок"), ТВ или полиция?*

He mentions Dostoyevsky's "Bobok" several times as a metaphor for obscene self-exposure, which is a part of the universal carnival, or circus -- another metaphor for the current condition of our world:

wholesale miracle shops – circuses, churches, cults, intelligent services, secret police and secret societies, banks.

*оптовые лавочки чудес – цирки, церкви, секты, разведки, тайная полиция и общества,
банки.*

Chertkov uses metaphors of joyfulness and entertainment as a façade, aware of the hidden sufferings behind them. His perception of our civilization's approaching end was based on various historical analogies, typical precursors being intense delight and a hedonism that is blind to others' suffering:

*Gradually, even the entire democratic world will be transformed into a gigantic dancing
Congress, like a herd of elephants stomping down anything growing of its own accord.
Постепенно и весь демократический мир превратится в один огромный танцующий
конгресс, вытаптывающий, подобно стаду слонов, всё растущее само по себе.*

When the jolly circus closes, and the cheerful crowd leaves, it returns to its routine – transforms into a torture chamber. Когда веселый цирк закрывается, и оживленная толпа вываливает из него, он возвращается к своей обыденности – превращается в камеру пыток.

In many instances, Chertkov subscribes to the common fear that scientific innovations can destroy our civilization. Again, ironical allusions to Soviet official clichés and puns based on specifically Russian idioms add to the significance of his ostensibly nonchalant sayings. For example, on reversal of the Red Army’s infamous WWII-era Order 227, which legalized summary executions for unauthorized retreats and was popularized as the "*Not one step back!*" ("*Ни шагу назад!*"). *The moment when the world can already say in good conscience – not one step forward! Момент, когда мир уже с чистой совестью может сказать - ни шагу вперед!*

This example is characteristic of the way in which Chertkov formulates his ideas: a mix of a pun, references to the past as a derided norm, and belief in the malignant nature of the social and scientific barriers that our civilization crosses.

Most of his entries are either impersonal statements or metaphoric allusions to “spirits” or uncontrollable “forces” that manipulate human deeds and destiny. It is obvious, however, that in the following entry he refers to the teachings of Freud and Marx, taken as undisputed dogma respectively by the West and the Soviet camp:

*They assured one part of humanity that all our happiness is below the waistline, and persuaded the others that happiness is wherever you like except there.
Одну часть человечества убедили в том, что все счастье находится ниже пояса, а другую в том, что где угодно, кроме этой части.*

It is undoubtedly true that entries pulled out from the tight fabric of Chertkov’s “diary” do not do justice to his ambitious project. In view of today’s social networking, his “writer’s diary” was indeed an innovative genre, similar to “life journals” and the growing number of other social networks, that appeared at least ten years after his work on the *Astral Storm*. Taken together, the entries constitute a polyphony of voices; the world he presents is a theatrical spectacle where various actors play both central and

small roles. That is why numerous lines can be understood, appreciated, or analyzed only within the whole of at least one completed “chapter.”

Russian humanitarian thought formed Chertkov’s intellectual world. He felt dispirited by indifference of the West to Russian history and culture, which Russians perceive as unique both in its high and its low forms. In the West, Chertkov’s research on forbidden authors and esoteric themes lost its significance as political and aesthetic protest. Gradually, his belief in the highest significance of literature served only to distance him further from the Western academia.

Contributing to Russia’s never-ending obsession with its status in relation to Europe, Chertkov gives an oblique allusion to Slavophiles’ and Westernizers’ visions of Russia’s future:

- You are quite old. – But why? – You as a people are old. – And what about you? – Oh, we are young! – But how is that evident? – It is obvious from our stupidity. – Стары вы очень. – Но почему? – Народ вы старый. – А вы? – А мы — молодой. – А из чего это видно? – А из нашей глупости.

Chertkov makes several statements that witness how clearly he understood his potential role in Russian culture and how painfully unappreciated he felt. Now and then he drops:

The end result of consistent perfectionism (perfect - faultless, but not completed) - death and oblivion. Конечный результат последовательного перфекционизма (перфект – совершенно, но не закончено) – смерть и забвение.

How many people occupy my place. – Pretty many. Сколько на свете людей, занимающих мое место. – Довольно много.

I was demoted from professors to students – but of all subjects. Из преподавателей я был разжалован в студенты – зато всех наук.

The judgement is frightening in its inevitable injustice. Суд, страшный своей неизбежной несправедливостью.

He bitterly remembered that not a single voice was raised in his defense in 1957 when he was arrested on political charges and sentenced to hard labor camp. As much as Chertkov’s sensitivity to historical injustice drove him to dig out texts of forgotten

authors, it must have been especially painful for him to realize that the same fate would befall his own writings. Russia failed to benefit from his intellect and his talent, but these gifts were not valued in Europe either:

- *“But he is a thief,” the minister of international trade said, “he robbed Russia of himself. - Да это же вор – сказал министр внешней торговли – он украл у России себя.*