

## Introduction

After the French Revolution, relatives of the guillotined victims used to gather regularly for *Bals des victimes*, or Victims' Balls. Women wore a red ribbon marking the point where the guillotine cut. They cut their hair to bare their necks, imitating the haircut given the victim by the executioner. Inviting the women to dance, men would jerk their head sharply downward in imitation of decapitation. Dancing and flirting, they manifested their mourning for their fathers and mothers in macabre details.

It is possible that the whole story of these Victims' Balls is a subsequent, nineteenth-century romantic legend.<sup>1</sup> Many authors have repeated it, however, as I am doing now. Whether the French decadents of the postrevolutionary generation really gathered at Victims' Balls or not, they fantasized about doing so, passing these fantasies on through generations, all the way to us. These legendary balls provide a prototypical case of what I call mimetic mourning—a recurrent response to loss that entails a symbolic reenactment of that loss.<sup>2</sup> This re-presentation of the past—making the past present, if only in symbolic, detoxicated form—addresses the questions that constitute the core of mourning: How did it happen? Where and when? Why did it happen this way? Could it have happened differently? Could I have done something to prevent it? The mourner addresses these questions to herself and others, who might be either witnesses to the loss or its fictional narrators. Whether the mourner has evidence that testifies to the circumstances of the loss, or whether the reminiscence and the witness are pure fantasy, these re-presentations—bringing the dead

back to life in imagination, text, social interaction, or performance—are at the core of mourning.

It may be that, in general, the story of terror consists of two parts: the ascending part of history and loss, and the descending part of memory and mourning. While the ascending slope is all about mass murder and lonely deaths, the descending one is about symbolizing, sharing, and bonding. In *Victims' Balls* and mourning plays, poetry, humor, and pleasure play strangely prominent roles. For the descendants of the French revolutionary Terror, there was some pleasure in dancing at the *Victims' Balls*, composing stories about them, and sharing them with their peers and juniors. In contrast to some later concepts, such as Freud's repetition compulsion and the connected ideas of trauma and the posttraumatic, the stories of *Victims' Balls* presume that their participants operate in full consciousness of their individual losses and their collective mourning. Sharing experience is a source of pleasure, and this is why we retell such stories also with some residual pleasure.

In the stories of *Victims' Balls*, participants come together physically in a ritual of collective mourning, a behavior that we often observe among survivors of a catastrophe and the first generation of their descendants. Later generations continue to mourn and share, but they do not feel the need to bond and dance with their peers. As time passes and generations replace one another, their mournful, mimetic performances migrate to the increasingly virtual spaces of theater, art, and literature, and then to film, television shows, and social media. Academic historiography also plays its role in this broad process.

This book is part and parcel of this long-term development. I submit that, haunted by its unburied past, late-Soviet and post-Soviet culture has produced memorial practices that are worthy of detailed study. While the American historian Stephen Kotkin perceives a "Shakespearean quality" in the post-Soviet transformation, it is no surprise that the participants of this process employ equally dramatic metaphors, partially invented and partially imported, in their attempts to understand what has happened to their civilization.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the leading cultural genres in Russia often seem to be building on Gogol rather than on Shakespeare, and they manifest unusual, maybe even perverted, forms of mourning the past and comprehending the present.

Working independently on different continents, two leading cultural critics have formulated a "Fifty-Year Effect": this is how long it takes for

literature to estrange the tragic past, process its experience, and elaborate a convincing narrative capable of gaining wide if not universal acclaim. Stephen Greenblatt proposed this Fifty-Year Effect in his study of Shakespeare's, and specifically *Hamlet's*, relation to the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> Dmitry Bykov applied the same idea to Russia's historical prose, from Lev Tolstoy to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.<sup>5</sup> Fifty years, or two cultural generations, is how much is needed to make the work of mourning culturally productive. I would speculate that the historical processes of catastrophic scale traumatize the first generation of descendants, and it is their daughters and sons—the grandchildren of the victims, perpetrators, and onlookers—who produce the work of mourning for their grandparents: mass graves for the generation of terror, trauma for the first postcatastrophic generation, and mourning for the second.

Written in the 2000s, the current book is largely focused on the 1950s and 1960s, the productive time of post-Stalinism that would define many features, good and bad, of the forthcoming postsocialism. But in culture, any regularity is an invitation to violation, and the scope of this book extends far beyond the events that happened fifty years ago. Its early chapters examine the experience of those authors who were incarcerated in the 1930s and wrote their texts of scholarship and trauma in the 1950s. Then, the central chapters discuss the mourning processes of those whose parents were murdered or jailed in the 1930s, though some of the mourners were themselves also jailed in the 1960s. Finally, this book's concluding chapters lead the reader to the cultural products that have been composed by the current generation of writers and filmmakers, who have been looking at the terrible past of their ancestors and teachers from the distance of fifty years and beyond, with a focus that shifts in time with every passing year.

*Warped Mourning* discusses many cultural genres, from films to memorials, but its focus is on literature. The book begins with a discussion of the relations between mourning and other cultural and psychological processes, such as trauma, repetition, revenge, and humor. In chapter 2, I argue that mourning for the past is often connected to warning about the future, a correlation that is particularly clear in the aftermath—and anticipation—of man-made catastrophes. Chronologically, the action of this book starts in the dark decades, from the 1930s to the 1950s, when the Soviet state arrested its citizens, tortured them in specialized camps, and

let some of them return home, where these survivors met again with their families and colleagues. As I demonstrate in chapter 3, the cultural consequences of these encounters were both important and unusual. Under a regime that refused to acknowledge its own violence, mourning its victims was a political act, an important and sometimes even dominating mechanism of resistance to this regime. The book continues into 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev blamed the now-deceased Stalin for the “unjustified repressions,” and then into the Thaw of the early 1960s, which I interpret as the era of Soviet Victims’ Balls. In contrast to those balls that allegedly occurred in the period of the Restoration in France, the revolutionary regime was still in power when the mourning games started in Russia. In chapter 4, I read and contextualize some of the deepest, though disguised, stories of trauma and mourning that the surviving victims of terror, many of them professional historians, published after their release from the camps or exile. Chapter 5 shifts to other cultural genres of mourning, such as visual art and poetry. In chapter 6, the book takes its step into the mid-1960s, when intellectuals played melancholic games with the Soviet courts. The weird combination of mimetic mourning and political resistance led the most consistent mourners precisely and inexorably back to the sites of memory of Soviet terror, into the camps. In chapters 7 and 8, I discuss how late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russian films unfold their mourning for the victims of the past in narratives, high and low. Chapter 9 surveys monuments to the Soviet victims and speculates about their relations to texts of poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction. In chapters 10 and 11, the reader will learn about the current state of the post-Soviet mourning. It is as warped as ever, though in a new Russian way, of course.