

Putin's Fascists: Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia, by Robert Horvath, Routledge, 2020, \$160.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0367474133, \$32.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0367682958.

Robert Horvath provides a detailed account of the rise and fall of the neo-Nazi group Russkii Obraz. The Kremlin used it as a tool to splinter the radical right and to prevent a possible alliance between the nationalist and democratic opposition. The Kremlin abandoned it when it had served its purpose – and when it orchestrated a series of political murders. Showing extraordinary diligence, Horvath assembles the evidence by trawling through the far-right blogosphere, a shifting coterie of odious individuals and ever-changing micro-groups. The manipulation of radical nationalists fed into the power struggles between rival advisors within the Kremlin. Horvath summarized his preliminary findings in an article published in *Nationalities Papers* (42 [3], 2014).

Russkii Obraz was the brainchild of two history students, Il'ya Goryachev and Nikita Tikhonov, who met in 2002. Goryachev took the name Obraz (Image) from a Serbian nationalist organization (47). They started a journal, which invoked classic fascist tropes of racism, national degeneration, and adulation of violence. Tikhonov, a skinhead, was involved in the killing of an Antifa protestor in 2005 (43).

After the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Kremlin launched a “preventive counter-revolution” to forestall such a movement in Russia, masterminded by Vladislav Surkov and Gleb Pavlovsky (64). Russkii Obraz was recruited to write for Kremlin-backed newspapers and TV channels and to help run Duma election campaigns (73).

In 2008–2010, the Kremlin used Russkii Obraz against Aleksandr Belov's Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) (110). Russkii Obraz was transformed from “a private club of young neo-Nazis into a Kremlin-backed public organization” (135). By 2010, Russkii Obraz had a dozen regional branches, were running summer military training camps, and even had their own clothing line (164). They also tried to infiltrate mainstream pro-Kremlin youth groups like Molodaia gvardia and Mestnye (167). The high point was November 4, 2009, when they were allowed to hold a concert featuring neo-Nazi bands such as Kolovrat on Bolotnaia square in downtown Moscow, the Kremlin's goal being to draw people away from the radical Russian March in the suburbs (171). In the November 2010 Russian March, the Russkii Obraz banner carried the words “Work makes free” (*trud delaet svobodnym*) – the slogan above the gate at Auschwitz (201).


Goryachev's main inspiration was Serbian far-right nationalists. He was also impressed by the model of Irish nationalists, whose political wing Sinn Fein provided a front for the armed IRA (107). (This despite the fact that the IRA failed to achieve their goal of a united Ireland, and Sinn Fein gave up armed struggle with the 1998 Good Friday accord.)

Alongside their public and Kremlin-sanctioned activism, Goryachev helped Tikhonov create an underground terrorist movement, BORN, an acronym for “Combat Organization of Russian Nationalists.” BORN's first victim was Antifa activist Fedor Filatov, who was stabbed to death by Tikhonov and skinhead Mikhail Volkov in October 2008 (127). (Volkov had Hitler's face tattooed on his chest.) After killing several Central Asian migrants, in January 2009, Tikhonov, along with his accomplice Evgenia Khasis, shot dead human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova on the street in downtown Moscow (130). The FSB arrested Tikhonov and Khasis in November 2009. BORN struck back, killing another Antifa leader on November 16, 2009, and federal judge Eduard Chuvashov on April 12, 2010 (186). The Federal Security Service (FSB) “pulverised” the neo-Nazi underground, arresting activists and closing web sites (215). Goryachev gave video testimony for the prosecution of Tikhonov, but had since fled to exile in Serbia. Interrogators gathered incriminating information about Goryachev's role in BORN from Khasis and Tikhonov (243). He was arrested in Belgrade in 2013 and extradited to Russia, where he received a life sentence in 2015 (253).

The Kremlin was alarmed by the potential liberal-nationalist fusion advanced by Aleksei Navalny during the protests of 2011–2012, triggered by Putin’s decision to return to the presidency. Putin cracked down on street protests while promulgating a program of “conservative” values: campaigning against immigration, homosexual propaganda, and Pussy Riot’s challenge to the church (226). It was a *Russkii Obraz* linked website that first leaked the identities of the Pussy Riot protesters, a sign that the Kremlin was still using the group in 2012 (237). The Kremlin dropped sponsorship of anti-immigration campaigns after the racist violence against immigrants in Birulevo in October 2013.

Horvath’s meticulous work joins a small but important body of research on the complex and contested place of the radical right in Putin’s political pantheon. Further examples include Fabrico Fenghi’s study of Eduard Limonov’s National Bolshevik Party, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying: Nationalism and Protest in Post-Soviet Russia* (University of Wisconsin Press: 2020).

The book is exhaustively documented, with over 1,400 footnotes. The sources include 57 volumes of prosecution materials for the Goryachev trial in 2015 (273). Horvath notes that much of the material he uses has subsequently disappeared from the web – including the Goryachev trial documents. Horvath downloaded much of the original material he was using for safekeeping. One wonders if historians and social scientists are being routinely trained to do this – or do we naively assume that material on the internet will be available forever, somewhere?

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