"Kill the State in Yourself": Totalitarianism and the Illiberal Dissidence of Egor Letov

Katherine Frevert
Oberlin College

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“Kill the State in Yourself”: Totalitarianism and the Illiberal Dissidence of Egor Letov

Katherine Frevert
Candidate Toward Senior Honors
Oberlin College Department of Russian and East European Studies
Thesis Advisor: Vladimir Ivantsov
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Abstract

The Siberian punk movement of the 1980s is often regarded as the Soviet Union’s most aesthetically and politically iconoclastic rock underground. Amidst the numerous bands the scene produced, none has matched the notoriety of Grazhdanskaia Oborona (Civil Defense) and its leader Egor Letov. At first glance, Letov’s songs declaring hatred for the “totalitarian” Soviet Union and its destruction of the individual evoke associations with the previous generation of Soviet dissidents, who used the term “totalitarianism” to contrast the Soviet system with the Western democracy they admired. Yet Letov, who rejected democratic reforms and after the collapse of the USSR became an ardent communist, described totalitarianism not as a form of government but as an inborn state of being. Accordingly, resistance toward the Soviet state became a manifestation of the struggle against human nature. Totalitarianism thus serves as a lens through which to examine the role of radical politics in Grazhdanskaia Oborona: a reflection of existential rebellion. By analyzing his interviews and musical output in the mid- to late-1980s, I argue that Letov manipulates listeners’ understandings of what it meant to be “against” in the Soviet Union by drawing from existing rhetoric of political protest, replacing the image of the liberal dissident with that of a rebel whose radical politics reflect an existential struggle. I demonstrate his conception of totalitarianism as a line of continuity between his “anti-Soviet” and “pro-communist” years. In doing so, I present Letov as a figure whose works defy conventions of liberal political resistance traditionally employed by Western scholars of the Soviet Union.
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Aside from the members of my thesis committee, there are several other individuals and groups to whom I owe my gratitude:

To Maia Vladimirovna Solovieva, whose unflagging support has made my years in the Russian Department unforgettable.

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To my parents, who have always been there to listen (and not only to the radio show).

To my brother, Aleksandr, who has endured countless impromptu speeches about the history of Siberian punk and listened to some truly bizarre music at my behest.

And finally, to Egor Letov, for helping me kill the state within myself.
Introduction

In 2018, Maria Aliokhina of the Moscow feminist punk collective Pussy Riot attended the Edinburgh International Book Festival to discuss her newly released memoir *Riot Days*. In the book, Aliokhina chronicles her ordeals in a penal colony and persecution by the Russian authorities following Pussy Riot’s scandalous performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 2012. Her plight aroused international interest – not in the least from those who saw parallels between Pussy Riot’s brand of political activism and that of opponents of Soviet power. When her interviewer stated that Aliokhina was “connected with a long line of dissidents who challenged authoritarianism in [her] country,” she agreed, hearkening back to the generation of activists of the 1960s and 1970s, whose desire to expose the Soviet Union’s abuses of human rights were met with harsh repression through forced psychiatric treatment and interment in the GULAG system.

In Putin’s Russia, she explained, the situation was different; whereas before the individuals facing persecution presented a genuine danger to the state’s ideological foundation, now “you [could] be arrested for nothing.”1 Yet not all those targeted were truly harmless to Putin’s government. Some, like the members of Pussy Riot, threatened to disrupt the legitimacy of his rule through their public acts of protest. Aliokhina thereby places herself in a continuity with the dissidents of the Soviet past; she, like the generations before her, is prepared to suffer imprisonment and dehumanization in order to reveal the Russian government’s wrongs both to her compatriots and to the eagerly watching Western audience.

Later in the same interview, however, Aliokhina referred to a far different figure among her inspirations – one whose political activity could hardly be deemed a heroic struggle for

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human rights. When the interviewer inquired about her childhood, she brought up her longstanding passion for music, both Western pop artists as well as “Russian punk from the eighties” that she warned her audience had likely never heard of. She named only one band: Grazhdanskaia Oborona (Civil Defense), led by Egor Letov. The band, she assured her listeners, was “quite cool,” distinguished by Letov’s “amazing poetry.”

On the level of purely stylistic influences, this association is perhaps not surprising. Grazhdanskaia Oborona is undoubtedly the most well-known representative of the Siberian punk underground that emerged in the Western Siberian cities of Omsk, Tiumen’, and Novosibirsk in the mid-1980s. The Siberian punk scene was heralded for its aesthetic daring at a time when punk rock remained on the margins even amidst the perestroika-era flourishing of rock groups in central cities such as Moscow and Leningrad. Furthermore, the uncompromising political stances of its members, whose work was characterized by explicit condemnations of the Soviet system, provided the movement with a reputation of iconoclasm that the Moscow and Leningrad rock bands lacked. Accordingly, the Siberian punk scene is widely regarded as the most uncompromisingly political musical underground in the Soviet Union.

As politically-focused activists working through the medium of punk rock, the members of Pussy Riot could hardly be ignorant of this rich musical history, particularly that of Grazhdanskaia Oborona, which became the scene’s figurehead. Furthermore, the biography of the group’s founder and central figure, Igor Fëdorovich (Egor) Letov (1964-2008) follows a similar arc of artistic creation in the face of relentless state persecution. Not long after Grazhdanskaia Oborona was founded in 1984, the band’s subversive music caught the attention of the KGB, and Letov was compelled to stay in a psychiatric hospital for three months, where he claimed to have been forced onto antipsychotic drugs. Upon his return, isolated from his

2 Ibid.
comrades and avoiding continuous persecution by state authorities, Letov produced a staggering number of albums with songs excoriating the Soviet regime’s ubiquitous presence in all facets of life, its ability to induce its citizens to adopt its ideology and carry out its bidding. In many ways, the nascent Siberian punk scene owed its cohesiveness to Letov, who produced and recorded scores of albums in his home studio and collaborated with numerous musicians in side projects, thereby leaving his stylistic and ideological mark on the creative products of his contemporaries. By the end of the 1980s, Letov had achieved cult-figure status in the Soviet musical underground.

Here, it is not difficult to see how Letov might serve as an inspiration for the members of a contemporary outfit such as Pussy Riot, particularly one seeking to orient itself with the legacy of Soviet dissidents: in spite of the state’s attempts to quell his protest, he continued to express his contempt for the Soviet system through his music, decrying the state’s “totalitarian” excesses. Yet while Pussy Riot can be fairly unproblematically termed “anti-Putin,” it is far more difficult to call Letov straightforwardly “anti-Soviet.” Despite his songs in the 1980s railing against the Soviet system, he also expressed skepticism at perestroika-era reforms – and, indeed, in democracy itself, which was often presented by the dissidents of the 1960s and 70s as the solution to the ills of the communist regime. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Letov’s ideological ambiguities rose to the forefront. Rather than embracing the downfall of the Soviet government for which he had so long declared his scorn and hatred, Letov turned to nostalgic visions of the communism that never was, the ideology uncorrupted by the blunders of the Soviet government. Perhaps most controversially, he was one of the original members of the National Bolshevik Party, an extremist organization uniting elements of the far right and the far left under its suspiciously Nazi-reminiscent banner. Aliokhina’s admiration of Grazhdanskaia
*Oborona* thus becomes more puzzling than it initially seems. As an activist who aligns herself with the Soviet dissident tradition – a tradition centered around international appeals toward the defense of human rights and the introduction of democratic reform – her reference to a figure of the underground who rejected not only Soviet power but its replacement as well appears incongruous.\(^3\)

Nevertheless, her statement of admiration for Letov’s poetry – and lack of acknowledgement for his problematic political background – mirrors the dominant tendency among a recent wave of scholars, mostly Russian, who have begun to take Letov’s work as an object of academic study. Rather than being studied as a political actor or as a representative of the Soviet Union’s most distinctive punk rock underground, Letov is analyzed as a poet, his texts examined for connections and allusions to previous avant-garde traditions in Soviet and Russian art and literature. In all such studies, Letov’s avant-garde poetics, rather than his radical politics, are at the forefront. Aleksandr Cherniakov and Tat’iana Tsvigun, for instance, draw parallels between Letov’s manipulation of language and that of 1920s poets such as Daniil Kharms and Vladimir Maiakovskii, while Matvei Yankelevich marks the absurdist poet Aleksandr Vvedenskii as a particularly prominent influence on Letov’s texts.\(^4\) Meanwhile, S. S. Zhogov links *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* to the more recent Moscow Conceptualist movement of the 1970s and 80s.\(^5\) In some sense, this direction is logical: by situating Letov’s work in a poetic tradition,  

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scholars lend it artistic legitimacy as an object of study, distinguishing it from less “literary” punk rock. The fact that this poetic tradition is specifically avant-garde, furthermore, draws a line of continuity between Letov and members of earlier artistic undergrounds. Yet the undercurrent to these tendencies seems to be that Letov’s works should be valued, analyzed, and integrated into the avant-garde “canon” first and foremost due to their poetic significance, a move that obscures Letov’s radical politics.

Letov’s political tendencies – a crucial part of both his musical creativity and his biography – have received comparatively little attention from scholars. Moreover, authors who allude to his anti-Soviet themes in the 1980s and extremism in the 1990s do so with caution, frequently placing politics on a secondary level to literary legitimacy. Il’ia Kukulin, N. Liotin, and Artur Vafin all refer to Letov’s controversial politics primarily as a shock tactic: Vafin speculates on the role of Letov’s “games with politics” as “masks,” while Liotin examines Letov’s flirtations with extremism as part of a self-created myth. Kukulin goes perhaps even further, declaring Letov’s politics an “external” phenomenon and thus not worthy of extensive analysis. Letov’s own statements on politics rarely receive explicit scholarly attention, and when scholars do mention them, they tend to circle back to the need to prove the literary worth of Letov’s poetic works. In his review of the book Stikhi, a compilation of Letov’s poetry and song texts, Danila Davydov refers to Letov’s political engagement as a “metonymic expression of a philosophical position” rather than an end in and of itself. Yet instead of exploring this idea in

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7 Kukulin, “Kak ispol’zovat’ sharovuiu molniiu v psikhooanalize.”

8 Danila Davydov, “Pank-pamjatnik.” Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie 6, no. 64 (2003), 314.
depth – or quoting Letov’s own statements on the subject – Davydov expresses his hope that the publication of Letov’s work will allow his creativity to reach “connoisseurs of the poetic word.”\(^9\) Thus, Letov’s politics are once again made secondary to his potential literary status, if they are not dismissed entirely.

In comparison with the profusion of recent Russian-language scholarship on *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, there remains a relative dearth of academic attention toward Letov’s work in English-language publications. For scholars writing in English, politics cannot be so easily avoided; establishing Letov’s status as an inheritor of literary and avant-garde traditions requires not only assuring readers of his poetic legitimacy but also addressing his problematic associations with extremism through his 1990s allegiance to the National Bolshevik Party – a period marred by accusations of fascism. Yngvar Steinholt confronts this issue directly, concluding that while Letov may have adopted a number of provocative beliefs and engaged in shock-value political tactics, he was never a fascist; instead, his insistence on remaining outside the bounds of popular culture meant that he was “first and foremost punk.”\(^10\) In his dissertation on the phenomenon of the underground in Russian literature and culture, Vladimir Ivantsov establishes a similar continuity between Letov’s seemingly disparate political stances as the manifestations of an “underground” consciousness that resists assimilation into the mainstream of cultural norms and dominant political systems alike.\(^11\) Such an argument places Letov in a literary tradition – that of the underground, a concept originating with Dostoevsky – but does not ignore Letov’s political engagement in favor of his artistic innovations. Both Steinholt’s and

\(^9\) Ibid.
Ivantsov’s works thus present a more nuanced approach to Letov’s politics by establishing continuity rather than making excuses or skirting around the issue altogether.

Yet if Letov’s worth as a literary figure has already been accepted, if his works have already been scrutinized for their poetic linkages to Russian avant-garde traditions, then the question arises: how should we study Letov in a way that does not sacrifice his radicalism for depoliticized poetical analyses? I believe the answer lies in the aspect of his works that has received disproportionately little scholarly attention in comparison with its public interest: their political defiance. While previous scholars have alluded to Letov’s approach to politics as a facade or the externalization of an existential battle, they have done so primarily in an attempt to explain the inconsistencies of his ideological positions. Rather than studying Letov in continuity with previous forms of protest or avant-garde art, I aim to analyze his works as an intentional rupture from the prevailing visions of what political defiance entailed in the Soviet Union.

In his Soviet-era musical works, Letov employs language of “antitotalitarianism” to evoke associations between his creativity and the struggle of the 1960s- and 70s-era dissidents, who took up the term “totalitarianism” as an epithet for the system of government that curtailed their autonomy. Yet even prior to his enthusiastic advocacy of communism in the years immediately following the Soviet Union’s collapse, Letov used his interviews and songs to redefine totalitarianism not as a particular type of state but as part of the human condition. Accordingly, his “anti-Sovietism” in the 80s and extremism in the 90s become manifestations of a fight against a very different sort of totalitarianism than the one condemned by the dissidents of previous generations: a totalitarianism of the mind present in all people regardless of the state system under which they live. Letov’s approach to radical politics, therefore, challenges established notions of political opposition in the Soviet Union, which have been dominated by
the “dissident” discourse of individuals struggling under a faceless regime for human rights and
democracy. Perhaps most importantly, Letov’s manipulation of the dissident archetype – a
manipulation I argue to be intentional – demonstrates that he himself was aware of and attempted
to problematize this straightforward interpretation of political resistance in the late Soviet period.
His statements on politics, both applied to his work and to his life, are not only deserving of
analysis but integral to the comprehension of his creativity.

Analyzing Letov’s texts through the framework of theories of totalitarianism, I
demonstrate how Letov subverts traditional notions of antitotalitarian protest, replacing the
paradigm of liberal dissent with a unique combination of existential rebellion and radical politics.
I approach Letov not as a depoliticized poet but as a political figure whose defiance of
entrenched visions of anti-Sovietism reflected itself in his music. I see this historiographical
angle as my primary innovation in the emerging study of Letov and Grazhdanskaia Oborona.
Furthermore, by doing so, I aim for this thesis to be of interest not only to scholars of Letov but
to those seeking to disrupt entrenched narratives of Soviet-era political rebellion that idealize the
liberalism of the dissidents as an unproblematic model for present-day forms of protest.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, proceeding from established conceptions of
Soviet-era defiance to Letov’s own political philosophy. In Chapter One, I examine the history of
the term “totalitarianism”: its origins in Western Cold-War-era scholarship, its adoption by
Soviet dissidents seeking an epithet with which to condemn the communist system and appeal to
values of democracy and personal freedom, and the subsequent prevalence of the dissident
archetype in Western academia. While Letov’s biography appears on the surface to validate this
paradigm of political defiance, his rejection of democracy and embrace of communism render it
insufficient. In Chapter Two, I engage in close reading of the texts of Grazhdanskaia Oborona
songs dating from 1987 to 1989 through the framework of totalitarianism as it has traditionally been conceived: an oppressive state absorbing its citizens wholly into the official ideology. Finally, in Chapter Three, I complicate this interpretation by introducing Letov’s idea of anti-Soviet rebellion not as a means of bringing about democracy but as the clearest manifestation of an existential struggle, using his statements on “metaphysical totalitarianism” as an alternate lens through which to analyze his “anti-Soviet” works. In representing Letov as a manipulator of the dissident tradition rather than its inheritor, I hope not only to complicate existing scholarship on his works but also to problematize traditional definitions of totalitarianism and political defiance within the Soviet Union – a concept that retains its relevance for today’s Russia. As the world searches for explanations of the Russian government’s war in Ukraine and its appeal among ordinary citizens, Letov’s work provides a crucial reminder that the means of combating a repressive state are not limited to idealized Western visions of democracy and capitalism.
Chapter One
“This Bloodstained Ideology”: Totalitarianism and the Myth of the Soviet Dissident

On April 10th, 1987, at the First Novosibirsk Rock Festival organized by the regional Komsomol, Egor Letov gave his first official performance under the name Grazhdanskaia Oborona – one that established his notoriety as an artist willing to openly defy the Soviet system.

The fact that Letov was able to perform in such an unlikely venue hinged on a number of fortunate coincidences. He had arrived at the festival as an observer along with his musical collaborators Evgeny and Oleg Lishchenko, and upon learning that the Komsomol had issued an unexpected ban on the groups Zvuki Mu and AuktsYon, the trio of Omsk rockers volunteered themselves to fill the unexpected gap in the program. Letov and the brothers Lishchenko submitted their texts to hasty examination by the censors before they took the stage and, to their audience’s shock, launched into a round of songs from the repertoire of their provocatively-named musical project Adol’f Gitler (Adolf Hitler). Punctuated by Letov’s cries of “Panki khoi!” and “Long live punk rock!”, the songs’ lyrics appear on the surface to be a startling vindication of Nazi atrocities, vigilante violence, and Holocaust denial. One can only imagine the kind of effect an exhortation like “Read Mein Kampf!” must have had on an audience of Soviet youth raised on glorifications of the USSR’s victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War. Indeed, the three punk rockers sang with such enthusiasm that it was difficult for the audience to

13 Short for “Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodëzhi” (Young Communist League), the youth division of the Soviet Communist Party.
14 Steinholt mistakenly identifies Adol’f Gitler as Letov’s “short-lived first band project” dating from 1982; however, the project was conceived of not by Letov but by Evgeny Lishchenko, and their single album Asylum (Lechebnitsa) was recorded not in 1982 but in 1987, scarce weeks before the infamous concert in Novosibirsk.
15 Literally, “Punks, khoi!” The exclamation “khoi” is often attributed to Letov; allegedly he invented it as a Russian equivalent of the British punk “oi!”. Whether or not this mythical origin story is true, the exclamation figures prominently in much of his music, particularly in the latter half of the 1980s.
discern whether they were parodying Nazism or praising it.\textsuperscript{16} Yet beneath the inflammatory lyrics, the underlying goal of the Adolf Hitler project was perhaps even more antithetical to Soviet values: “to bring the views of Nazi ideology to frank and startling absurdity in which, as in a mirror, another ideology would be reflected: the brutality of Soviet totalitarianism.”\textsuperscript{17}

It was in the wake of these six seemingly pro-fascist songs that Letov, up until then hammering away at the drums, took center stage to perform his own compositions. Against a backdrop of furious guitar riffs, Letov’s snarls of “we all approve of totalitarianism” provoked an immediate uproar. By the time he reached the end of his set – breaking into mocking laughter and shouting “You’re not funny! Country of fools!” (“Ne smeshno na vas! Strana durakov!”) – the festival jury was incensed to the point that they cut off the sound.\textsuperscript{18} After the concert, Letov was forced to flee and remained a fugitive for the following months to avoid a second stay in the psychiatric hospital. Although this first official performance of \textit{Grazhdanskaia Oborona} was cut short, the concert was a watershed event for the emerging musical underground in Siberia. A saying that circulated afterward solidified the concert’s legendary status: “Punk rock existed in the USSR for only twenty minutes – during Grazhdanskaia Oborona’s performance in Novosibirsk. Everything else is post-punk.”\textsuperscript{19}

This claim suggests the dual importance of Letov’s performance in Novosibirsk: it was foundational not only in putting an emerging music scene on the map but also in establishing an inextricable link between Soviet punk and fury at the communist order. Accordingly, if this first

\textsuperscript{16} Relevant here is Alexei Yurchak’s conception of \textit{stiob}, a mockery that “required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.” I refer to the concept of \textit{stiob} during my textual analyses in Chapter Two. See Yurchak, \textit{Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 250.


\textsuperscript{19} Shostak, “GRAZHDANSKAIA OBORONA.”
performance of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* was truly the USSR’s most genuine form of punk rock, it was due to Letov’s lambasting of the Soviet regime, his disdain for its slogans, his bluntness in criticizing its all-consuming grip over the individual. Letov consequently became an icon not only of punk rock but of political defiance, a quintessential rebel combining bold music styles with fury toward the “totalitarian” state in which he lived. Yet the conceptualization of the Soviet system as totalitarian did not originate with Letov. In the previous two decades, a generation of political activists – the Soviet dissidents – made the term totalitarianism a crucial component of their anti-Soviet lexicon, adopting it from Western Cold-War-era scholars to bolster their international appeals for human rights and democratic reform. In order to determine why Letov, who eschewed reformism and proclaimed himself a true communist, used a term so burdened by anticommunist connotations, we must first analyze the theory of totalitarianism and its history in the Soviet Union and the West.

In this chapter, I draw upon foundational writings on totalitarianism and provide an overview of the fraught history of the concept’s application to the Soviet Union by both Western critics and Soviet dissidents in order to contextualize Letov’s persistent usage of the term and implicit references to the accompanying theory. In demonstrating the integral role of the concept of totalitarianism to the paradigm of the Soviet dissident, I posit that the term may serve as a lens through which one can analyze Letov’s overtly political – or “anti-Soviet” – musical output during the latter half of the 1980s as a continuation and ultimately a complication of existing frameworks of political defiance in the Soviet period. Finally, I return briefly to Letov’s biography in the context of this myth of the Soviet dissident to provide an avenue for in-depth lyrical analysis in the following chapters.
“Red Signal, Conditioned Reflex”: Theories of Totalitarianism

Of all the epithets applied to the Soviet state in academic settings and public discourse alike, perhaps none has elicited such polarized reactions as “totalitarian.” Amidst the mass bloodshed and tumult of the second World War, the concept of totalitarianism served as a convenient descriptor for those seeking to comprehend the emergence of a seemingly novel type of state capable of hitherto unimaginable violence. Moreover, it became a useful overarching term for states in which all members of a population seemed to adhere to a single unifying ideology. Theories of totalitarianism thus provided Western scholars of the Cold War era with a framework that allowed them to perpetuate their anticommunist agenda: by drawing parallels between the horrors of the Nazi regime and the atrocities of the Stalinist purges, scholars could pronounce a sentence of unambiguous moral damnation upon the Soviet Union. The term’s rhetorical force was not lost on the Soviet dissidents of the 1960s and 70s, whose references to the “totalitarian” Soviet Union garnered sympathy in the West. Despite the term’s ubiquity in reference to the Soviet Union, the exact nature of the term remains nebulous – a categorization which, as Jay Bergman claims, “probably obscures more than it clarifies.” Nevertheless, to comprehend the term’s significance in the lexicon of Soviet-era political defiance, one must identify the elements of totalitarian theory that made it an appealing framework through which both Western scholars and Soviet dissidents could condemn the mechanisms of the Soviet state and their consequential effect on its subjects.

Perhaps the definitive text of the theory of totalitarianism and the study of early twentieth century dictatorships is Hannah Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism, first published in

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In the book’s third section, entitled “Totalitarianism,” Arendt frequently juxtaposes the arbitrary bloodshed inflicted during the Stalinist terror with the genocidal horrors of the Nazi regime. Rather than seeking to typify totalitarian regimes according to specific characteristics or to outline the conditions under which they form, Arendt focuses on the psychological mechanisms behind totalitarian power: the reasoning behind seemingly willing mass participation in state violence by ordinary citizens. Citizens subject to a potent combination of stringent social control and utopian promises of an official state ideology, Arendt claims, become “marionettes” rather than human beings. In a totalitarian dictatorship, “individuality, anything indeed that distinguishes one man from another, is intolerable” and thereby replaced by slavish devotion to the will of the state. Individuals become useful only insofar as they are capable of serving the interests of the ruling government through “conditioned reflexes” similar to those exhibited by the dogs in Pavlov’s famed experiments; otherwise, they are “superfluous,” completely devoid of personality, spontaneity, and private life. The individual is thus eliminated and civil society entirely erased. Such conditions preclude the very idea of resistance, while human capacity for brutality is revealed to its full extent.

While Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism is primarily psychological in nature, another foundational text, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s Totalitarian Dictatorships and Autocracy (1965), provided a specific typology of totalitarian regimes. In their words, the two men sought “to give a general descriptive theory of a novel form of government.” Though Friedrich and Brzezinski were hardly the first to employ the concept of totalitarianism in

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24 Ibid., 457.
25 Ibid.
27 Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorships and Autocracy, xi.
reference to the governments of Stalin and Hitler – a central component of Arendt’s work – they provided not only an effective catch-all term but a clear set of characteristics by which a regime could be categorized as totalitarian. They outlined six elements of totalitarian dictatorship: “an ideology, a single party typically led by one man, a terroristic police, a communications monopoly, a weapons monopoly, and a centrally directed economy.” These elements had, as Friedrich and Brzezinski assured, existed individually throughout history, yet it was only with the technology of the twenty-first century that regimes could accumulate the power necessary to combine all six traits into a totalitarian “syndrome.” In this manner, these previously isolated characteristics “intertwined and mutually [supported] each other,” creating a fundamentally new form of government unprecedented in its reach over all aspects of human society.

At the center of any totalitarian dictatorship, Friedrich and Brzezinski posited, was “an elaborate ideology, consisting of an official body of doctrine covering all vital aspects of man's existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere, at least passively.” Inherent in such an ideology was a radical break with the past through which previous configurations of society and government were rejected. This rupture served simultaneously as the pretext for the inception of an unheard-of level of state control as well as the mechanism by which centralized state power would be maintained. Friedrich and Brzezinski emphasize the manner in which an all-consuming political philosophy takes on a pseudo-religious character for its adherents: an ideology containing “strongly Utopian elements, some kind of notion of a paradise on Earth” evokes “a depth of conviction and a fervor of devotion usually found only

28 In their introduction to the book’s first edition, Friedrich and Brzezinski express their debt to Arendt.
29 Friedrich and Brzezinski, 21.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 22.
33 Ibid., 26. Friedrich and Brzezinski open their first chapter with Lenin’s declaration that the Bolsheviks “created a new type of state” (3), thereby emphasizing a fundamental connection between conceptions of totalitarianism and the Soviet Union.
among persons inspired by a transcendent faith.” Thus, the subjects of a totalitarian dictatorship, vulnerable to these utopian promises, are coerced into ideological unanimity, “internalizing” the doctrine of the state to the degree that they are “remold[ed] and transform[ed].” As the means employed by the state to produce a complacent and devout populace, ideology – the first and perhaps most vital characteristic of Friedrich and Brzezinski’s “totalitarian syndrome” – becomes the oil of the dictatorial machine.

Furthermore, such a dictatorship required mechanisms of ensuring ideological devotion in the populace: party discipline and police terror, the second and third elements in Friedrich and Brzezinski’s typology. As a rule, the totalitarian dictatorship was ruled by a single mass party that implicated all citizens in its activities. However, it was often led by a single charismatic figure, and only a select core of individuals, perhaps “up to ten percent” of the population, were themselves members of the party, “passionately and unquestionably” dedicating their lives to promoting the “general acceptance” of the official state ideology. Such parties, Friedrich and Brzezinski claimed, bore the seeds of totalitarian dictatorship from their very inception, having “developed a pronounced authoritarian pattern while organizing themselves into effective revolutionary instruments of action” – doubtless a reference to the Bolshevik Party as conceived of by Lenin, whose hierarchical structure the authors of Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy viewed as the precursor to the Communist Party under Stalin. Moreover, the propagandistic activities of the resulting party elite were simultaneously “supported and supervised” by a secret police engaged in systematic terror directed not only against “demonstratable ‘enemies’ of the regime” but “more or less arbitrarily selected classes of the population” as well. As a result of

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 16.
36 Ibid., 22.
37 Ibid., 25.
38 Ibid., 22.
the dual pressure of propaganda and the threat that dissent would be met with swift retribution, the subjects of a totalitarian regime had no choice but to adhere to the state’s demands.

Hierarchical party control and terror, of course, were hardly unique to totalitarian dictatorships. Indeed, Friedrich and Brzezinski anticipated this counterargument based around examples of historical autocracies and apparatuses of power – Julius Caesar, they note, also possessed a “terroristic secret police” as a means of consolidating power, while the Catholic Church long sought the total ideological conformity of its members. Yet these past systems were limited by the lack of modern technology, which Friedrich and Brzezinski held to be a “significant precondition for the invention of the totalitarian model.” Only with the advent of the twentieth century could the state employ modern forms of communication to surveil the broader population rather than simply a ruler’s circle of collaborators – and, for that matter, to ensure the penetration of the state’s ideology into all aspects of human life. Moreover, any attempt at individual armed resistance became futile and obsolete in the face of a government that wielded instruments of mass destruction: machine guns, tanks, atom bombs. Thus, the final three characteristics of totalitarian dictatorship – centralized control of means of communication, “weapons of armed combat,” and the economy – were predicated upon the government’s ability to utilize modern technology to ensure total ideological homogeneity. Thus, a truly totalitarian dictatorship in accordance with Friedrich and Brzezinski’s typology was a “new phenomenon”: at no previous point in history had the technology existed that would allow the state to compel the entirety of its subjects to act in line with an all-consuming ideology.

39 ibid.
40 ibid.
41 ibid.
42 ibid.
43 ibid., 19.
Considering that Friedrich and Brzezinski formulated their typology of totalitarianism’s essential features at the height of the Cold War, it is unsurprising that their definition owed much to contemporary discourse around the Soviet Union under Stalin and Germany under Hitler—that is, attempts by scholars to explain the pervasiveness of official ideologies under which acts of mass violence were carried out. The term “totalitarianism” served for its adherents as a convenient link between the atrocities of fascist and communist dictatorial regimes, which Friedrich and Brzezinski held to be “basically alike… in terms of organization and procedures—that is to say, in terms of structure, institutions, and processes of rule.”\(^{44}\) Though they emphasize the erroneous nature of direct equivalencies between Stalin and Hitler – their “acknowledged purposes and intentions” could not be more dissimilar – Friedrich and Brzezinski nevertheless contend that the two leaders’ regimes both represented a novel degree of state power over the individual.\(^{45}\) These communist and fascist dictatorships, they argued, represented the closest real-world manifestations of the individual’s total absorption into the state apparatus and thus were “sufficiently alike” to be “[classed] together and [contrasted] not only with constitutional systems, but also with former types of autocracy.”\(^{46}\) The totalitarian model, therefore, was intrinsically intertwined with the practice of comparing Nazism and Stalinism.

For Western scholars of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, theories of totalitarianism provided a convenient framework through which to condemn not only the violent excesses of Stalinist terror but the Soviet project as a whole – which, considering the amount of federal and private funding poured into Soviet studies during the Cold War for the defense of “America’s national interests,” was often the ulterior motive behind scholars’ interest in the Soviet Union in

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 20.
the first place.\textsuperscript{47} If, as Friedrich and Brzezinski contended, the calculated and hierarchical environment of the Leninist party prior to the October Revolution contained the seeds of totalitarian dictatorship, Western scholars could indict not only the purges and the GULAG system but also the entire Soviet system from its inception.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, if the Stalinist Soviet Union was the quintessential totalitarian state, and if totalitarian regimes practiced such all-consuming ideological control that their continuation was ensured, it was only logical to conclude that the Soviet Union was doomed to perpetual autocratic rule, and that its populace was incapable of resistance.

Yet beginning in the 1960s, Western scholars of the Soviet Union began to criticize this “totalitarian” approach as simplistic and reliant on deterministic condemnations that reflected a Soviet Union more ideologically homogeneous than that which existed in reality.\textsuperscript{49} Scholars examining the interplay between Stalinist state institutions and the individuals whom they sought to govern emphasized the lack of a cohesive ideological message – and, what was more, introduced the idea that the subjects of a supposedly “totalitarian” regime were perfectly capable of acting to further their personal interests rather than those of the party.\textsuperscript{50} The availability of previously inaccessible archival materials was both instrumental in breaking the hold of totalitarian theory over Western scholars of the Stalinist Soviet Union as well as in testifying to the increased liberalization of Soviet life under Khrushchev. An environment in which the regime openly confronted and condemned its past of arbitrary terror could hardly be deemed “totalitarian” in the traditional sense outlined by Friedrich and Brzezinski, while the existence of

\textsuperscript{48} Cohen, \textit{Rethinking the Soviet Experience}, 42.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 21.
condemnation itself contradicted Arendt’s conception of the individual’s total absorption by state interests.\textsuperscript{51} The 1960s ushered in the totalitarian model’s fall from hegemony in Western academia, replaced by more nuanced approaches to the interaction between the Soviet government and its citizens.

Nevertheless, even as the totalitarian framework was beginning its gradual descent from favor in scholarly circles, the concept remained prevalent in the popular imagination of the Soviet Union. The concept of totalitarianism, Enzo Traverso maintains, serves as a “reference point” for our “historical consciences,” allowing the public to retain “the memory of a century that experienced Auschwitz and Kolyma, the death camps of Nazism, the Stalinist Gulags.”\textsuperscript{52} Consequently, even as the term became controversial amongst Western academics, it never truly left the common vernacular, particularly in reference to the Soviet Union – indeed, it even saw a resurgence among a wave of French intellectuals in the 1970s who sought to moderate the country’s Marxist tendencies by advocating for an “antitotalitarian” liberalism.\textsuperscript{53} It was amidst this uneasy atmosphere that a new group of individuals seized upon the terminology of totalitarianism to contextualize their own experiences with Soviet power: the so-called “Soviet dissidents” of the 1960s and 70s.

\textbf{“Solzhenitsyn Wrote About Something Else”\textsuperscript{54}: A History of Soviet Dissidence}

In 1987, Egor Letov wrote one of the few \textit{Grazhdanskaia Oborona} songs to directly reference the Soviet dissident tradition – and also one of the few to change its name. Originally

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Cohen, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Enzo Traverso, “Totalitarianism: Between History and Theory,” \textit{History and Theory} 55 (2017), 117.
\end{itemize}
entitled after Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s renowned novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), the song offers images of dreary Soviet life not limited to the GULAG labor camp:

В кладбищенной конторе выпекали гроб  
В общественной столовой пожирали хлеб  
В трамвае пробивали проездной талон  
В подъездах экономили электросвет

In the cemetery office they were baking a coffin  
In the public cafeteria they were devouring bread  
In the tram they were punching a ticket  
In the entryways they were saving electricity

It was only on a later variant of the song that Letov added the final cryptic phrase, accompanied by wild laughter, that became the song’s new title: “Solzhenitsyn wrote about something completely different” (“Solzhenitsyn pisal o sovsem drugom”). This addition provokes an intriguing question: what was Letov’s purpose in referencing this tradition of political protest? Furthermore, if Solzhenitsyn wrote not simply about the drudgery of everyday life in the Soviet Union, then what was this “something completely different”?

Traditionally, the term “Soviet dissident” has been applied to a particular group of intellectuals whose social activism primarily took place in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Khrushchev’s attempts to rid the Soviet Union of its unpleasant Stalinist legacy gave way to stagnation – and, as some feared, a possible regression to earlier forms of repression. Small intellectual gatherings spawned discussion of dissatisfaction with the grip of state power over the

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56 Letov, “Solzhenitsyn.”  
individual’s private life and creative activities. Many dissidents knew all too well the Soviet government’s capacity to suppress political opposition, having experienced arrests for seemingly minor crimes, internal exile, the GULAG system, and punitive psychiatry. It was on the basis of these experiences that this generation of dissident intellectuals – among them such renowned figures as Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – became the voices for a new variety of moral condemnation of Soviet power: a decrying of the government’s abuses of “human rights” and its incursion on the “individual autonomy” of its subjects, which was often coupled with attempts at imploring Western nations to intervene in the development of Soviet society so as to prevent further atrocities.

Before the dissidents turned their pleas to the West, however, they focused upon a far different target: the Soviet government itself. In his analysis of the discursive fields inhabited by the dissidents of the 1960s and 70s, the historian Serguei Oushakine posits that the dissidents’ initial appeals constituted a “mimicry” of official state rhetoric rather than a distancing from it. In order to legitimize their demands for individual liberty, the dissidents elected “a strategy of identification with the dominant symbolic regime,” attempting to justify their beliefs as accordant with Soviet law and core values, which they held to have been corrupted by those in power. Thus did the dissident Pëtr Grigoriенко write to Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB, about the need to “get rid of the deformations of Lenin’s ideas” and return to the legal rights of the Soviet citizen as established in the nation’s constitution. Solzhenitsyn made a similar direct

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 151.
60 Bergman, “Was the Soviet Union Totalitarian?”, 256.
62 Ibid., 199.
63 Qtd. in Oushakine, “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” 200.
appeal to the government: in his *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* (1973), he alluded to a common concern of “the incomparable sufferings of our people” under Communist Party control.\footnote{Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*, 7.}

Yet by the mid-1970s, this strategy of addressing the Soviet government with its own language reached an impasse. The dissidents’ ranks had been thinned by a combination of emigration, arrests, and internal exile, and it seemed as if their demands, even bolstered by state rhetoric, were falling on deaf ears.\footnote{Oushakine, 211.} In response, the dissidents adopted a new strategy: mimicry not of Soviet rhetoric but of the liberal anticommunist jargon of the West. Where once they had addressed their own leaders, they now courted international support, a tendency illustrated by the physicist Andrei Sakharov, who in his series of demands for Western governments stated that “[not] only individuals but governments and international organizations must be concerned with defending human rights around the world.”\footnote{Andrei Sakharov, *My Country and the World*, trans. Guy V. Daniels (New York, NY: Knopf, 1975), 107.} These appeals were founded upon an adoption of the Western anti-Soviet vocabulary of “human rights,” individual freedoms, and – perhaps most crucially – antitotalitarianism.\footnote{Bergman, 247.}

On some level, it appears ironic that the Soviet dissidents transitioned to the totalitarian model as a means of condemning the government under which they lived at the same moment as it was losing its potency in Western academic circles. Yet it was precisely then, in the 1970s, that the totalitarian paradigm saw a resurgence among the public, making the West a prime target for the dissidents’ protest against what they saw as an all-encompassing ideology wielded by an oppressive state.\footnote{Traverso, 117.} The anticommunist connotations of the totalitarian model, furthermore, made it all the more attractive. If, as Jay Bergman asserts, the Soviet lexicon was limited to “terminology drawn exclusively from [... ] Marxism-Leninism,” and if that terminology had
failed the dissidents in the previous decade, then they were compelled to find a new language outside the bounds of state rhetoric.\(^6^9\) Borrowing from the Western anticommunist tradition, therefore, provided them with a common vocabulary of antitotalitarianism with the nations from whom they sought recognition.\(^7^0\) Furthermore, the term totalitarianism as employed in official doctrine had heretofore referred exclusively to fascism; by insisting that the Soviet Union too was totalitarian, dissidents effectively suggested its practices were just as morally reprehensible as those of Nazi Germany. One reader of dissident literature recalls how by “[comparing] the tortures between the two systems” of Nazism and Stalinism, the writer Vasilii Grossman managed to “imply that Communism could be a form of fascism” – for which his foundational work, \textit{Life and Fate} (1980), remained banned until after his death.\(^7^1\) Such a provocative rhetorical tactic was just as certain to find sympathy among Western intellectuals as it was to elicit the ire of Soviet leadership.\(^7^2\)

Moreover, conceptualizing the Soviet Union as a totalitarian dictatorship was not merely a pragmatic tactic; it was also a means by which Soviet dissidents could contextualize their own experiences of state repression. Though Western scholars traditionally conceived of the Soviet Union as totalitarian primarily in the Stalinist period, “the vast majority” of Soviet dissidents disparaged the Soviet Union’s supposedly totalitarian elements in the present day.\(^7^3\) The “totalitarian challenge,” as Sakharov termed it, was alive and well in the systems of ideological control he and his fellow dissidents had experienced for themselves: harassment, imprisonment in labor camps, and punitive psychiatry.\(^7^4\) Here, Hannah Arendt’s claim that totalitarian regimes

\(^{69}\) Bergman, 247.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid.  
\(^{71}\) Yurchak, 3-4. \textit{Life and Fate} was written in 1959 and was unpublished until 1980.  
\(^{72}\) Bergman, 252.  
\(^{73}\) Ibid.  
\(^{74}\) Sakharov, 103.
aim to “liquidate all spontaneity” and independent thought is especially relevant. The totalitarian model had for decades centered upon the ability of the state to subsume individuals into its ideology, and such a categorization seemed to Soviet dissidents to reflect their own clashes with state power. The existence of a coherent classification of totalitarian governments served as a validation of their experiences, a kind of scientific framework that, as Bergman puts it, “lent a patina of intellectual respectability to their criticisms of a regime they detested.”

However, when Soviet dissidents referred to the “totalitarian” nature of the Soviet state, they did so “casually, almost promiscuously” – less with a concrete definition such as Friedrich and Brzezinski’s in mind and more as a catch-all descriptor for statist incursions on individual autonomy. These descriptors often took on mythical proportions, extending to the domain of fiction: the dissident Vladimir Bukovskii, describing the “totalitarian” lack of individual liberty in Soviet society, wrote that his people were “in the grip of a ruthless dictatorship of a single party whose tentacles spread out into every corner of society, and [...] together with the KGB, this [coincided] almost literally with the society depicted in Orwell’s 1984.” This reflects a broader tendency by the dissidents to concern themselves primarily with the effects of totalitarianism on the human psyche. The prospect of a regime’s ability to carry out the “destruction of the individual personality” was, in the dissidents’ eyes, the most alarming aspect of Soviet ideological control – and one that could be conveniently deemed a manifestation of totalitarianism. Whether or not the Soviet Union aligned with more formal categorizations of totalitarian dictatorships – for instance, since the Stalinist campaigns of mass arbitrary terror had been both abandoned and openly disavowed by the ruling party – was unimportant. The

75 Arendt, 456.
76 Bergman, 255.
77 Ibid., 254.
79 Bergman, 256.
dissidents, having experienced acutely the lack of personal autonomy afforded to them in their country, could malign the Soviet Union on the same grounds as Western anticommunists did: as a nation that stifled human freedom.

However, the onset of social and governmental reform under Gorbachev brought to light the paradoxical use of the epithet “totalitarian” by the Soviet dissidents. After all, established theories of totalitarianism held that the subjects of totalitarian dictatorships had “internalized” official doctrine to the degree that their every action reflected the ideals of an inflexible state. If perestroika demonstrated that Soviet state power was willing and able to reform the system from within – indeed, if demands for reform could arise in the first place from a supposedly compliant populace – the Soviet Union could hardly be deemed a dictatorship free of political convictions deviant from the norm. In order to resolve these contradictions without abandoning the still-salient term “totalitarianism”, advocates of democratic reform adapted the totalitarian model to their own purposes: totalitarianism, they argued, represented an “aspiration to total power” over individual autonomy and expression rather than “the actual exercise of total power.” Thus, the Soviet system was construed as only partially totalitarian at best – a system whose odious grip over the human personality remained an ever-present threat, but a threat yet to be carried out in full. This model of incomplete totalitarianism lent credence to the dissidents’ appeals: if total control had not yet been achieved, it could be averted and replaced with a system of liberal democracy in which the autonomy of the individual would be upheld.

Although the conception of totalitarianism among Soviet dissidents was thus altered to reflect contemporary circumstances, this vision of liberal democracy remained vital to their use of such a weighted and provocative term. At the same time, the idea of Soviet subjects striving

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80 Friedrich and Brzezinski, “Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy,” 22.
81 Bergman, 265.
82 Ibid., 268.
for Western-style democracy in the face of an oppressive government proved tantalizing to scholars of the Stalinist past, whose embrace of the totalitarian model had waned since the decline of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{83} Anna Krylova famously termed this the search for the “tenacious liberal subject”; by centering their studies of the Soviet individual around paradigms of resistance, democratic ideals, and the fight for personal freedom, she contended, Western scholars were engaged in confirmation bias, finding in Soviet political defiance a validation of their own belief in the superiority of American-style democracy.\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, this pattern extended even to dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn who eschewed political liberalism in favor of nationalist, religion-heavy conservatism. Michael Christofferson describes how French anticommunist intellectuals “[appropriated] Solzhenitsyn to their cause” upon the publication of his famous work *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973).\textsuperscript{85} Despite his conservatism, Solzhenitsyn was thus interpreted as an advocate of “liberal” resistance – perhaps not entirely unexpected, given his remarks that Soviet ideology consumed “the whole life of society – minds, tongues, radio, and press – with lies, lies, lies.”\textsuperscript{86} The fact that Soviet dissidents themselves took up this language of totalitarianism – an all-consuming ideology crushing the individual spirit – seemed to confirm this simplistic narrative: that whatever the era, whatever beliefs its activists professed to hold, Soviet dissent remained fundamentally liberal.

For all its fraught history, the term “totalitarianism” has thus been intertwined with the development of political protest in the Soviet Union – and with the ultimate goal of achieving an idealized liberal vision of personal freedom, if not Western-style democracy and capitalism.

\textsuperscript{83} Anna Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000), 141.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. For an example of a scholarly work that Krylova critiques as an example of this tendency, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
\textsuperscript{85} Christofferson, 91.
\textsuperscript{86} Solzhenitsyn, 46.
Totalitarianism thus becomes an effective lens through which one can analyze the tactics and aims of different forms of dissent within Soviet life. Yet the use of the totalitarian model in the twilight years of the Soviet Union was not limited to liberal reformers or dissidents calling for international attention to human rights. Totalitarianism – both the term itself and the associated lexicon of oppressive and dictatorial control over personal autonomy – was also a crucial feature of a distinctly illiberal model of political protest: the punk rock music of Egor Letov in his band Grazhdanskaia Oborona.

“Ice Under the Major’s Feet”: Letov as Soviet Dissident? 87

At first glance, the history of Egor Letov’s creative development in the Siberian punk underground of the 1980s seems to bear much in common with the experiences of the previous generations of Soviet dissidents: a narrative of struggle for personal autonomy in the face of opposition from a state that seemed impermeable to criticism. Moreover, the obstacles Letov faced in producing and disseminating his radically anti-Soviet music create notable similarities with the dissidents’ attempts at expression. Yet despite the enduring iconoclasm of his work, Letov, unlike the political and social activists before him, cannot easily be construed as a figure of “liberal” dissent, one whose ultimate goals center around idealistic conceptions of democracy and personal liberty. As someone who voiced doubts in the possibility of democracy and embraced communism following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Letov is a far more complex figure than the dissidents whose activism provided Western anticommunists with straightforward validation of their own views.

In analysis of Letov’s early musical activity, the atmosphere of Siberia emerges as a stage for the contradictions of Soviet life in the 1980s: the dissonance between the reformist policies of

perestroika and the decades-long legacy of strict ideological control. On one hand, the musicians of the emerging punk underground in cities such as Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Tiumen’ lacked the semi-official status of the bands that originated and performed in the KGB-supervised rock clubs of Moscow, Leningrad, and Sverdlovsk. This comparative lack of state supervision afforded Siberian musicians the opportunity to compose and perform songs which were far more unorthodox in both form and content than those of typical “Russian rock” bands such as Akvarium and Kino, whose political implications resided primarily in universal references and vague metaphors. Punk bands, moreover, could hardly hope to gain access to official venues such as the Leningrad Rock Club and the Moscow Rock Laboratory without diluting their stylistic extremes at a time when the Party authorities condemned punk bands as advocates of “neofascism,” “anticommunism,” and “violence.”

On the other hand, while perestroika allowed for increased musical expression in the “centers” of Leningrad and Moscow, liberalizing changes were late to arrive in Siberia. When speaking about Letov’s early musical activities, his elder brother Sergei recalls the significance of this contradiction in the development of a more authentic brand of rock: “For all of Russian culture, opposition from the authorities has always been crucial […] While in the Urals or in Petersburg there was no such opposition, in Siberia it was brutal.” The Siberian punk underground thus seems to recall the type of “incomplete totalitarianism” referred to by the activists of the 1980s: although its informal nature meant it was less subject to calculated ideological control, it was still prone to the state’s intrusions.

Perhaps the most infamous example of such state intervention in the history of the Siberian underground was early in Letov’s musical career, not long after the founding of his band

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Grazhdanskaia Oborona in 1984. Having been informed of Letov’s “anti-Soviet” musical activities, the authorities began a campaign of harassment against the members of Grazhdanskaia Oborona: Letov was sent to a psychiatric hospital for three months beginning in late 1985, while his bandmate Konstantin Riabinov was conscripted into the army despite having a heart condition that would have otherwise made him ineligible. The use of punitive psychiatry against Letov marks another striking similarity between his creative path in the 1980s and the struggles of the Soviet dissidents, many of whom – perhaps most notoriously Andrei Sakharov – were also wrongfully diagnosed with invented conditions such as “sluggish schizophrenia” and compelled to take unnecessary drugs in an attempt to transform them into conforming citizens.90 Letov’s later statements about his ordeal, complete with shocking accounts of forced medication, seem to draw upon these connections to the broader history of Soviet political dissent:

I was on ‘enhanced support,’ on neuroleptics. Before the psychiatric hospital I was afraid that there were certain things a person can’t stand – things that on a purely physiological level they can’t bear. I thought this was the most frightening thing possible. In the psychiatric hospital, when they started injecting me with super-strong doses of neuroleptics – after one enormous dose I even went temporarily blind – I first encountered death or something worse than death [...] The effect [of the treatment] is like a lobotomy. After that, a person becomes “soft,” “docile,” and broken for the rest of their life [...] At some point, I realized that in order to not go crazy, I had to create.91

In this recollection, Letov thus seems to express a similar impulse to the Soviet dissidents: of autonomous expression in the face of state-imposed ideology. Before his ordeal at the hands of the KGB, Letov’s allusions to the dissidents of the previous decades had existed on

90 Bergman, 256.
a surface level – for example, his decision to name his first band *Posev* after a Soviet emigre magazine simply because “it was the most outrageous name we could think of at the time.” Now, however, Letov began to cast himself and his fellow punks as a new movement of political defiance. The refrain “We’re the ice under the major’s feet” (”*My – lēd pod nogami maiora*”) exemplified a kind of constant resistance that placed Siberian punk in direct opposition with Soviet power.

Amidst this atmosphere of repression, the final years of the 1980s marked the most prolific period in Letov’s long-running musical career. He recorded scores of albums under the band name *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, including many in isolation during 1986 when his musical collaborators had been forbidden to contact him. His home studio became the center of a flourishing punk underground, where he recorded, produced, and participated in side projects with a number of his fellow artists. The latter half of the 1980s, furthermore, was perhaps the most overtly political period of Letov’s creativity, and certainly the most anti-Soviet. In his songs, Letov expresses disgust and scorn for the communist system both through openly disparaging language directed at “pro-Soviet bullshit” but also in the mockery of the official lexicon. It becomes difficult to read his adoption of the slogan “Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live forever” as unironic when accompanied by frantic guitar riffs and garbled howls.

Despite the distinct differences between Letov’s punk rock songs and the human rights appeals of the activists of the 1970s, it is thus relatively simple to cast Letov as a new kind of “Soviet

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92 Ibid.
93 Letov, “My – lēd.”
94 To name a few: *Anarkhiia; Kommunizm; Tsyganiata i ia s Il’icha; Chērnyi Lukich; Armiiia Vlasova; Yanka i Velikiie Oktiabr*i.
dissident”: an unapologetic rebel whose creative work represented a rejection of the communist system and a striving toward personal liberation in the face of tyranny.

However, this vision of Letov’s creativity as a form of liberal protest loses ground when one considers his musical and political activities following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Letov, who had up until this point made clear his hatred for the Soviet system, seemed to undergo an inconceivable ideological switch: in 1993, he organized a series of pro-communist concerts under the name *Russkii proryv* (Russian Breakthrough) and took part in the defense of the White House against then-president Boris Yeltsin’s forces during the constitutional crisis in October. In 1994, Letov became one of the founding members of the extremist “red-brown” National Bolshevik Party.97 The same man who had spent years excoriating the Soviet regime now not only denied any former anticommunism but also declared communism “the kingdom of God on Earth.”98 With such statements, Letov undermined the assumption that protest against the Soviet Union was anticommunist by nature, as it frequently was with the dissidents – and thereby made it exceedingly difficult for his Soviet-era works to be cast in the framework of liberal, pro-democratic protest. The fact that Letov’s songs of the 1980s nevertheless draw upon the dissident lexicon of Soviet power as all-consuming and “totalitarian” makes any kind of clear-cut interpretation of his work impossible, particularly in the context of his own turbulent life. Thus, rather than determining Letov’s alignment or lack thereof with traditional forms of political protest in the Soviet Union by superimposing his biography onto his work, I have elected to analyze the texts he produced himself: interviews, commentary on his creative development, and, first and foremost, his songs.

97 The term “red-brown” is typically applied to political groups who are viewed as holding allegiance to both communism (“red”) and fascism (“brown”). These tendencies are illustrated succinctly in the banner of the National Bolshevik Party, which hung above the stage in many of the *Russkii proryv* concerts: the flag of Nazi Germany with a hammer and sickle in place of the swastika. See Letov’s 1994 concert discussed in the introduction to Chapter Three.

In this chapter, we have seen how conceptualizations of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian state have long been intertwined not only with anticommunist aims in the West but also with the history of a distinctly liberal form of political dissent within the Soviet Union: that of the Soviet dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s, who placed central importance on individual autonomy. This same impulse of individual defiance in the face of government oppression is also visible in Letov’s personal history as the founder of Grazhdanskaia Oborona. Yet as we will see in the upcoming chapter, the lexicon of totalitarian theory is also prominent in Letov’s “anti-Soviet” musical works, which demonstrate a similar striving for personal expression and rejection of the dehumanizing political system. In the following chapters, I aim to examine Letov’s work in the context of this paradigm of Soviet dissidence: whether Letov’s works demonstrate an intentional manipulation and ultimate subversion of existing ideas of a “totalitarian” Soviet Union, and if so, what alternative vision of political defiance they might offer. To do so, I will begin by analyzing Letov’s musical works that appear to validate traditional “totalitarian” conceptions of the Soviet Union – and, by extension, the established image of the Soviet dissident.
Chapter Two
“We All Approve of Totalitarianism”: Representations of Totalitarianism in the Music of Grazhdanskaia Oborona, 1987-1989

In autumn of 1987, Egor Letov briefly left his native Omsk to meet with punk musicians in the nearby city of Tiumen’. At the time, Grazhdanskaia Oborona was at the height of its musical activity: isolated from his previous bandmates due to continuous pressure from the KGB, Letov had just recorded five albums entirely on his own in the span of a single month. He was also beginning to collaborate with other prominent figures of the Siberian underground such as Yanka Diagileva and had received invitations to record with producers in the countercultural “center” cities of Leningrad and Moscow. His visit to Tiumen’ resulted not only in a one-off album of the spontaneously-organized “group” Defense Instructions (Instruktsiia po oborone) but also a lengthy interview with several local punks led by Roman Neumoev, leader of the band Survival Guide (Instruktsiiia po vyzhivaniu), for the punk zine Siberian Ulcer (Sibirskaia iazva). During the interview, Letov relayed stories of government repression, detailed his musical activity, offered his opinions on punk aesthetics – and, perhaps most importantly, contextualized these elements in his work’s political mission.

After the group of punks poured themselves some tea and Letov answered a few introductory questions about life in Omsk – how was the alcohol in the city, what kind of scene (tusovka) did he associate with – Neumoev gave his guest a more complex question, to the laughter of his companions: “What’s your attitude toward Soviet power?” “Fucking horrible (ves’ma khuëvoe, bliat’),” Letov replied. When Neumoev pressed him for an explanation, he

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100 Letov et al., “Panki v svoём krugu (zastol’nye besedy v trokh chastях),” Sibirskaia iazva 1 (1988), https://www.gr-oborona.ru/pub/anarhi/1056978975.html. It is important to note that the recorded version of the conversation bears slight but crucial differences from the transcript: in the transcript, Letov’s “ves’ma khuëvoe, bliat’” (“fucking horrible”) becomes the less vulgar “ves’ma plokhoe”
continued: “Because everything I do is a fight against totalitarianism in all its manifestations. And power in our country – the sovdep – represents the worst manifestation of statism, therefore, totalitarianism, therefore, fascism, to be specific. And I’m a very ardent antifascist. And that’s why I think that all punk – in general, everything I can do with my songs – is to fight back against totalitarianism.”

While this provocative rhetorical maneuver of equating Soviet power with fascist regimes was nothing new to Letov – it was, after all, the basis of the Adolf Hitler project – the year 1987 marked the beginning of his most explicitly “anti-Soviet” musical output. Between 1987 and 1989, Letov released 14 albums within the framework of Grazhdanskaia Oborona, ranging from the reggae-influenced punk of Mousetrap (Myshelovka) (1987) to the industrial and brooding Russian Field of Experiments (Russkoe pole eksperimentov) (1989). The latter album was recorded less than a year before Letov suspended Grazhdanskaia Oborona’s activities scarce months prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite the wide range of musical genres Letov incorporated into his work, all of his music from these final years of the 1980s abounded with overt and underlying critiques of Soviet power’s grip over the individual, occasionally coupled with explicit references to the totalitarianism he claimed to oppose. Yet if the struggle against totalitarian Soviet power was, as Letov declared, the central aim of his work, then the question arises: what did totalitarianism mean to him, and what were its most reprehensible elements?

("very bad"), and the direct references to the Soviet government are omitted, making Letov’s statement appear like an attack on the concept of power in general – the original “tvoe otnoshenie k sovetskoj vlasti” (“what’s your attitude toward Soviet power”) becomes the more generic “tvoe otnoshenie k vlasti” (“what’s your attitude toward power”). I have chosen to abide by the recorded version. See AudioArkiv “Fonograph,” “Egor Letov – Interv’iu Romanu Neumoevu. 1987 god,” YouTube, August 23, 2021, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0B8Ua_vQa6I.

101 Letov et al., “Panki v svoём krugu.”
In this chapter, I examine the struggles between state power and Letov’s lyrical subjects from 1987 to 1989 in order to discern potential antecedents to his conceptualization of the Soviet Union as totalitarian. I begin by analyzing the direct references to the term “totalitarianism” within Letov’s musical works between 1987 and 1989, demonstrating his familiarity with the theory’s application to the Soviet Union. Moreover, in examining texts that do not explicitly reference the term “totalitarianism” but contain clear messages of antipathy toward Soviet power, I find that the animosity of Letov’s lyrical subjects is centered on elements similar to those that preoccupied the Soviet dissidents: the omnipresence of a state capable of penetrating all aspects of life, depriving individuals of their autonomy, and leaving its citizens with no choice other than to enact unthinkable violence on its behalf. Letov’s portrayal of totalitarianism in this “political” period thus appears to be an intentional continuation of the modes of anti-Soviet rhetoric employed by the dissidents of the 1960s and 70s.

“Total Syndrome”102: Links to Established Theories of Totalitarianism

In her periodization of Letov’s creative stages within Grazhdanskaia Oborona, A. S. Novitskaia characterizes his work spanning from 1987 to 1989 as an era centered on “social reflection” and contemplations of relations to the state.103 Though she acknowledges the stylistic differences between earlier and later albums in this period, Novitskaia argues that this common political focus allows them to be grouped into one cohesive whole.104 Due to my focus on the political elements of Letov’s work – and the fact that this era of Grazhdanskaia Oborona offers a rich selection of text for analysis – I have chosen to focus my examination on this period.

102 “Total’ni sindrom.” Egor Letov, “Totalitarizm.”
104 Ibid., 175.
Furthermore, Letov’s texts from this time abound with references, both implicit and explicit, to the concept of totalitarianism, allowing for analysis of his ties to the Soviet dissidents before him. Chapter One’s background on the typology of totalitarian regimes provides us with a set of characteristics which we can identify in Letov’s songs, while the history of Soviet dissidence relayed in the same chapter invites comparisons between Letov and previous manifestations of political protest.

As the most obvious musical manifestation of Letov’s preoccupation with totalitarianism, the Grazhanskaia Oborona song “Totalitarianism” (“Totalitarizm”; 1987) can be read as a primer for the key elements of his portrayal of Soviet power: an all-encompassing, ideologically-driven force which denies freedom of choice and action to its subjects. Moreover, “Totalitarianism” references not only the term itself but also seems to hint at the political theory that accompanied it, as discussed previously in Chapter One. The song begins, in the model of many of Letov’s compositions, as a list of objects and phenomena which are then applied to a central concept:

Красный сигнал
Условный рефлекс
Тоталитаризм
Тоталитаризм
Собаки Павлова исходят слюной

Red signal
Conditioned reflex
Totalitarianism
Totalitarianism
Pavlov’s dogs salivate

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105 Letov, “Totalitarizm.”
By association, the “red signal” and “conditioned reflex” of the first two lines become foundational elements of a totalitarian state’s power over the individual. The as-yet faceless subject of “Totalitarianism” has been reduced to the level of Pavlov’s dogs, figuratively “salivating” in response to the regime’s signals. In place of conscious choice, the indoctrinated individual has no recourse but to carry out the biddings of the state. The fact that the signal in question is red makes it plain that Letov is referring not simply to any authoritarian government but to the system of Soviet communism.

By connecting these phenomena to the term “totalitarianism,” Letov establishes a striking parallel with the political theories of Hannah Arendt discussed in the previous chapter – namely, her examination of the effects of totalitarian rule upon the individual. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt asserts that totalitarian rule “can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes […] Pavlov’s dog, the human specimen reduced to a series of elementary reactions […] is the model ‘citizen’ of the totalitarian state.” Considering the prevalence of antitotalitarian rhetoric in dissident discourse, it is unsurprising that the dissident writer Bukovskii borrowed the same formulation: “Men are not like Pavlov’s dogs,” he insisted; “[…] a man is not going to submit to being trained.” His interpretation thus emphasizes the dissidents’ emphasis on the struggle for personal liberty as well as their vision of an “incomplete totalitarianism” in which resistance is still possible. In this context, Letov’s mention of “Pavlov’s dogs” seems hardly coincidental. While it is highly unlikely that Letov would have read Arendt’s work itself at the time – the first official Russian translation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was not published until 1996 – Bukovskii’s statement suggests that the key motifs of Arendt’s

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106 Ibid.
108 Bukovskii, 84.
book entered the lexicon of Soviet political protest. The citizen whose crisis forms the structure of the song “Totalitarianism” serves as a quintessential totalitarian subject deprived of choice, the real-life manifestation of Arendt’s theories of total power. Unlike Bukovskii, who alludes to a state which has not achieved complete control, Letov depicts a totalitarian regime in all the horror of its classical sense.

Moreover, “Totalitarianism” shows striking similarities not only with the works of Hannah Arendt but also with Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s typology of totalitarianism as outlined in Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy. In the song’s second verse, Letov makes a reference to a “total syndrome” (“total’nyi sindrom”). This presents a tantalizing parallel with the theory of Friedrich and Brzezinski, who described the characteristics of a totalitarian dictatorship – a central ideology propagated by a ruling party and safeguarded by a system of arbitrary terror, which harnessed the innovations of modern military and communicative technology to achieve complete control over the populace – as forming a “syndrome, or pattern of interrelated traits.” Letov’s use of the word “syndrome” thus seems an intentional gesture to the international language of antitotalitarianism that served as the foundation for the lexicon of the Soviet dissidents. Yet “Totalitarianism” focuses less on the mechanisms of authoritarian rule and more on its dehumanizing effects. The “syndrome” compels the citizens to “approve of the total reflex” (“odobriaem total’nyi refleks”) as well as totalitarianism itself (“my vse odobriaem totalitarizm”). While this less quantitative focus of the word “syndrome” increases the already strong likelihood that Letov’s terminology overlap with Friedrich and Brzezinski is coincidental, it also indicates that his hatred of totalitarianism is

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109 The first official Russian edition of The Origins of Totalitarianism, translated by Yu. A. Borisova et. al. as Istoki totalitarizma, was published by TsentrKom in 1996. It is unclear whether an unofficial translation circulated prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union; if so, it remains similarly unknown whether or not Letov himself would have been able to read it.

110 Friedrich and Brzezinski, 21.

111 Letov, “Totalitarizm.”
concentrated on the detrimental effects of autocratic government on human freedom – a concern mirroring that of the dissidents who preceded him.

Letov’s pervasive references to the threat of fascism provide an additional line of connection between his philosophy of totalitarianism and that of the dissidents, both of whom linked the horrors of Nazism with the practices of the Soviet government in the Stalinist past as well as in the present day. In the song “Man is a Wolf to Man” (“Chelovek cheloveku – volk”; 1988), Letov lists numerous manifestations of prejudice and statist control, not unlike his equivalency between the Soviet system and the Nazi regime in his interview with Neumoev:

Чёрная сотня, красный фашизм,
Русский шовинизм, красный фашизм
Тоталитаризм, милитаризм
Тerrorизм, нацизм, короче — фашизм\(^{112}\)
The Black Hundreds, red fascism
Russian chauvinism, red fascism,
Totalitarianism, militarism,
Terrorism, Nazism – in short, fascism

In the span of four lines, Letov manages not only to parallel historic phenomena of nationalistic fervor – “the Black Hundreds”\(^ {113}\) and “Russian chauvinism”\(^ {114}\) – but also to draw a direct line from the ideology of the Nazi regime to the communist doctrine of the Soviet present. Indeed, the term “red fascism,” repeated three times in rapid succession, serves as a cutting

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\(^{112}\) Letov, “Chelovek cheloveku – volk,” https://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056975685.html. I reference the earlier version of the song that appears on the album Vsë idët po planu rather than the later version that appears in the album Toshnota, in which the second “red fascism” (“krasnyi fashizm”) is replaced by “Marxism-Leninism” (“Marksizm-Leninizm”). It is also noteworthy that Arendt makes reference to the same proverb that inspired the song’s title: Homo homini lupus est (Arendt, 459).

\(^{113}\) Russian ultra-nationalist brigades at the center of numerous antisemitic pogroms between 1905 and 1917.

\(^{114}\) “Great Russian chauvinism” (“velikorusskii shovinism”) was frequently condemned by the Bolshevik leadership, most notably Lenin, in the years following the October Revolution.
condemnation of the Soviet project. Like the dissidents, Letov appears to understand the shock value of these equivalencies between communism and fascism: in a nation where Nazism was the ultimate taboo, there could be no better way to strip the Soviet government of its legitimacy than by accusing it of repeating fascist ideology and practice. Both in provocative lyrics such as those of “Man is a Wolf to Man” and in scandalous performances like that of the group Adolf Hitler at the Novosibirsk Rock Festival, Letov made this form of condemnation a continuous weapon in his political arsenal – a comparison which owed much to the antitotalitarian rhetoric of the dissidents.

Furthermore, as with the dissidents, Letov’s concept of totalitarianism appears to extend beyond the bloodshed of the Stalinist past. While the term “totalitarianism” has traditionally been applied to the regimes of Stalin and Hitler, Letov’s songs repeatedly present the possibility that historical atrocities are destined to repeat themselves – if they have not done so already. When Letov sings “dump us all in a heap in some new Babyi Iar”115 (“svalite vsekh nas kuchei v nekii novyi Babyi Yar”) in the song “Mimicry” (“Mimikriia”; 1987), he not only places an infamous example of Nazi mass slaughter in a Soviet context but also makes it clear that this level of state-inflicted bloodshed poses a prescient threat.116 The lyric’s structure becomes a taunt of sorts for the Soviet state to reveal its hidden ambitions: the butchering of its own citizens, the likes of which has not been seen since World War Two.

Letov applies this motif of cyclical genocide to events of the Soviet past as well, particularly the purges carried out by Stalin in the late 1930s. Perhaps nowhere is this demonstrated more directly than in the song “The New 1937” (“Novyi 37-i”; 1988). The lines

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115 A ravine that served as the site of Nazi mass killings, largely of Ukrainian Jews, during the Second World War, and later became the subject of a well-known poem by the dissident writer Evgeny Evtushenko. Babyi Iar, located in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, was bombed on March 11, 2022 during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which at the time I write this thesis remains ongoing.
“the spring of perestroika slows down / having prepared for us, unnoticed, a new 1937”

(“pruzhina perestroika zamedliaet khod / nezametno dlia nas ugotoviv novyi 37-i”) position Gorbachev’s reforms as a facade for the renewal of arbitrary Stalin-style terror. Historical violence is bound to return, whereas the promises of perestroika are illusory – a sentiment that parallels that of the Soviet dissidents of the 1970s, who were forced to reconcile the reforms of their era with their own experiences of repression. The Soviet Union, they argued, was still totalitarian insofar as it aspired to complete control over each facet of the individual’s life and thinking. The fact that it no longer actively practiced terror did not negate the purges of the 1930s, nor did it mean that the state’s atrocities ended with Stalin. Like the dissidents, Letov experienced for himself the state’s desire to control independent expression during the KGB suppression of Grazhdanskaia Oborona in 1985 and his subsequent stay in the psychiatric hospital. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that Letov’s references to the repetition of classic “totalitarian” violence under Stalin and Hitler indicate both doubt in reformist measures and an ideological link with the dissidents before him.

By directly referencing the term totalitarianism alongside condemnations of the Stalinist and Nazi regimes, Letov demonstrates an awareness of the relevance of totalitarian theory in the final years of the Soviet Union. As with the generation of dissidents before him, totalitarianism in its traditional sense – the individual subsumed entirely into state ideology, active mass terror, inflexible state power – no longer seemed an apt description of a Soviet Union undergoing rapid social and political upheaval. However, Letov’s songs seem to demonstrate that the term has not outlived its usefulness, just as his personal clashes with state security may have kindled his doubts in the veracity of reform. As a means of criticizing the hypocrisy of Soviet power via

comparisons with fascism, the term totalitarianism remained an advantageous rhetorical tool as it had for the dissidents of the 1970s.

Yet Letov’s manipulation of the theories of totalitarianism extends beyond direct references to the term. Even when the word itself remains unpronounced, the language of totalitarianism – of a state capable of transforming its subjects from people into unthinking instruments of its own will – is an integral motif in Letov’s songs during his “political” period between 1987 and 1989. In order to examine these implicit manifestations of totalitarian theory, I will first briefly analyze a recurring element of Letov’s work: a state vying for total power and uninterrupted ideological domination over its citizens.

“The Evil All-Seeing Eye”\textsuperscript{118}: The State and its Mechanisms

Though any discussion of totalitarianism in the works of Egor Letov inevitably involves the Soviet system, Letov’s representations of the state itself – its commands, its mechanisms, its efforts at the ideological conditioning of its people – are far from consistent. Indeed, though it is useful for the purposes of this analysis to focus upon Letov’s “political” period as a whole – the albums spanning \textit{Mousetrap} in 1987 to \textit{Russian Field of Experiments} in 1989 – his earlier depictions of the state are far more absurd, even seemingly light-hearted, than those that followed, which take on more chilling existential implications in tandem with his turn towards a more grim and industrial musical style. Throughout the entirety of this period, however, Letov’s depictions of the Soviet state focus less upon any precise repressions it undertakes and more upon the mentality it imposes on the populace, an idea to be further explored in the following section of this chapter.

On the surface, *Mousetrap*, Letov’s first album recorded in KGB-inflicted isolation, appears far less “political” than later albums such as *Combat Impulse* (*Boevoi stimul*; 1989). Nevertheless, the album contains a variety of references to a repressive state whose capabilities for intrusion into individual life seem at times almost hyperbolic. Perhaps one of the most striking phrases on this topic can be found in the lyrics to the song “Ravings” (“Bred”; 1987) wherein Letov associates “communist ravings” (“kommunisticheskii bred”) with the threatening specter of the state: its “evil all-seeing eye” (“zloveshchii vsevidiashchii glaz”). In this song, Letov endows the state with an exaggerated ability to surveil its citizens, a characteristic fully in keeping with established theories of totalitarianism. As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the term’s adherents among the dissidents maintained that the Soviet state aspired to totalitarian control on a fictional scale – Bukovskii, for instance, declared that the Soviet Union was an “almost literal” manifestation of George Orwell’s *1984*. Furthermore, this reference to pervasive surveillance strengthens associations with the Soviet dissidents, whose impressions of state control over free expression were doubtless influenced by their own experience as intellectuals whose activities received an outsized degree of attention from the government. Thus, for someone such as Letov, who claimed to have been forcibly medicated in a psychiatric hospital for his musical activities and was at the time forbidden from associating with his former collaborators, the “eye” of the state might have indeed appeared to be “all-seeing.”

Letov brings the absurdity of state control to the forefront in another of his 1987 compositions: “TsK,” short for “Tsentral’nyi Komitet” (the “Central Committee” of the Soviet Communist Party, or TsK KPSS). The song encapsulates a number of Letov’s musical tendencies at the time of the album’s recording: reggae influences, forays into obscenity, and above all a

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119 Ibid.
120 Bukovskii, 80.
derisive attitude toward the Soviet order. Furthermore, his mockery has not yet been tempered by seriousness, as in his later work; instead, it is light-hearted, laughter at a state whose actual function has become obscured by a series of contradictory and ludicrous commands:

Злобно обрыгай — но не слишком густо
Круто умирай — но не слишком быстро
Выколи глаза — но найди причину
Уничтожь врага — и забудь кручину\textsuperscript{121}
Viciously throw up – but not too richly
Die cool – but not too quickly
Gouge out your eyes – but find a reason
Destroy your enemy – and forget your troubles

These barrages of commands, which serve as the song’s verses, are followed by Letov’s exclamations of “Central Committee!” and are thus transformed into directives-of sorts, the bizarre orders of an illogical government whose domination is less sinister than it is ridiculous.\textsuperscript{122} Here, it is important to note the musical elements of the song as well: Letov’s exaggeratedly high-pitched tone on each “Central Committee” underscores the lyrics’ humor while providing an edge of disdain.

While the state in Letov’s earlier politically-focused works is thus on some level an invented one – its capacity for surveillance exaggerated, its directives mutated – his later compositions turn toward the actions of the Soviet government itself. Letov portrays a ruling party whose grip over the populace is justifiable in the name of a glorious communist future, relaying propagandistic slogans and optimistic ideological rhetoric. The manipulation of preexisting texts of Soviet official doctrine and mass culture became a prominent motif of

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
Letov’s work in the latter half of the 1980s. This tendency is undoubtedly best illustrated within the conceptualist musical project Kommunizm – a sort of musical Sots-Art – developed by Letov and his collaborator Konstantin Riabinov. However, it is visible in the songs of Grazhdanskaia Oborona as well, where quotations of Soviet slogans are distorted by their punk context. In the title song of the 1989 album Great and Eternal (Zdorovo i vechno), Letov quotes a slogan originally attributed to Lenin: “The Party is the wisdom, honor, and conscience of the epoch” (“Partiia – um, chest’, i sovest’ epokhi”). In the context of the song’s abrasive guitar, interjections of harsh laughter, and the pseudo-slogan “great and eternal,” this quotation is transformed from an affirmation of Soviet power into a condemnation of its elimination of individual means of expression. Whereas in the song “TsK” the Soviet government’s commands are unfulfillable and nonexistent, Lenin’s words in “Great and Eternal” are familiar – a demonstration of the ruling party’s capability for an ominous rather than ridiculous degree of indoctrination.

As in “TsK,” the musical elements of “Great and Eternal” are notable as well. Aside from the reference to Lenin, the song contains a quotation from the song “For That Young Man” (“Za togo parnia”), a somber reflection on war written by the famous 1970s poet Robert Rozhdestvenskii, who contrasts a soldier’s death with a hopeful future:

Обещает быть весна долгой
Ждёт отборного зерна пашня
И живём мы на земле доброй

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123 Sots-Art, a visual art movement that emerged in Moscow in the 1970s, is often referred to as the Soviet equivalent of Pop-Art; rather than depicting products of consumerist capitalist society in order to mock it, sots-artists based their works upon communist slogans and Socialist Realist art. For further comparisons between Kommunizm and Sots-Art, see Zhogov, “Kontseptualizm v russkom roke.”
125 Ibid. Letov credits the phrase “zdorovo i vechno” to his musical collaborator Oleg “Manager” Sudakov.
126 Ibid.
The spring promises to be long
The fertile land awaits grain
And the earth we live on is kind

Before shouting the final word of each line, Letov hesitates, thereby lending irony to the lyrics of Rozhdestvenskii’s composition. Letov’s lyrical subject, rather than embracing the promises of the future, seems to pause to contemplate and reject them in favor of focusing on the emptiness of the present Soviet ideological doctrine.

Though the state in Letov’s works enacts its power through slogans and commands, his lyrical subjects perform these commands as if in anguish, suggesting that they do so knowing that to repeat official rhetoric unthinkingly destroys their own ability of expression, a crucial component of the totalitarian process. Here, Vladimir Ivantsov’s analysis of Letov’s works as representations of Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse is particularly relevant. In the seminal work *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), Mikhail Bakhtin developed the theory of “double-voiced discourse” by which an author “makes use [...] of other people’s words for the expression of [their] own particular intentions.”\(^{127}\) Ivantsov refers to Letov’s appropriation of, among other things, the “politically [...] dominant discourses” of the Soviet period as an example of this Bakhtinian concept.\(^{128}\) Letov’s use of slogans, therefore, cannot be read at face value; his punk style imparts irony into language originally intended as patriotic or ideologically conforming.

Letov’s shifting depictions of the Soviet state parallel his shifting musical tactics: from catchy melodies and nonsensical lyrics to a foreboding industrial landscape of agonized cries and slogans stripped of meaning. However, throughout the entirety of his “anti-Soviet” period,


\(^{128}\) Ivantsov, 200.
Letov’s portrayal of the state was one fundamentally in keeping with established visions of totalitarianism: a regime whose omnipresent ideological doctrine and ruling party made it capable of unprecedented control over the individual. This focus upon the assimilation of the individual into the mechanisms of the state is both a vital component of Letov’s vision of totalitarianism and an intriguing link to the discourse of the Soviet dissidents who preceded him, whose criticisms of Soviet power were concentrated around the lack of autonomy it allowed. In the following section, I examine the evolution of Letov’s depictions of the individual under the “totalitarian” Soviet state: an obedient subject more or less doomed to submission.

“Faceless Comrade”¹²⁹: Letov’s Totalitarian Subjects

Thus far, our discussion of totalitarianism in the works of Egor Letov has been more or less confined to the characteristics of the state, similar to the hallmarks of the “totalitarian syndrome” outlined by Friedrich and Brzezinski. In the name of an all-encompassing ideology preaching a utopian future, a mass ruling party utilizes a combination of terror, ubiquitous propaganda, and surveillance in order to keep the population in line. However, much like the Soviet dissidents of the 1970s, Letov’s primary source of discontent with this form of power was less in the mechanisms of government and more in their manifestations with the individual, a concept first elaborated upon in Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism, wherein she bemoaned the ability by which regimes such as those of Stalin and Hitler could induce their citizens to commit unthinkable acts of brutality towards their fellow human beings. This tendency toward morally reprehensible violence in the name of ideological conformity is perhaps one of the most crucial themes of Letov’s “anti-Soviet” period. In order to examine the degree to which Letov’s vision of totalitarianism aligned with that of the Soviet dissidents, it is necessary to focus in

particular upon his lyrical subjects, many of whom seem to act in line with Arendt’s most cynical observations about individuals under autocratic regimes: they are so consumed by state ideology that when they carry out their leaders’ most inhumane commands, they do so without a second thought. In this sense, the speakers at the center of Letov’s “political” songs are archetypal totalitarian subjects deprived of their ability to speak or act for themselves.

As in the preceding discussion of Letov’s representations of the state, one can distinguish Letov’s earlier works – notably in the cycle of albums recorded in 1987 – from his harsher style in 1988 and 1989. In the early songs of his “political” period, Letov’s depictions of the individual under totalitarian power verge on ridiculous, especially with their more-than-occasional vulgarity. Though its existential implications are not yet fully elaborated upon, the subject’s unquestioning obedience to the state is already a salient theme of Letov’s work. This hyperbolic compliance – along with Letov’s tendency toward obscenity and deliberately disgusting imagery – is perhaps best illustrated in the song “Aye!” (“Est’!”; 1987):

Каждый может в меня насрат
Каждый может в меня насссать
Я набит говном по горло
Я общественный унитаз
Мне велели — я ответил «Есть!»

Everyone can shit in me
Everyone can piss in me
I’m full of shit up to my throat
I’m a public toilet
I was ordered – I answered ‘Aye!’

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The vulgarity of these lines underscores the plight of Letov’s lyrical subject: the individual, having completely submitted themselves to “public” use, has been degraded from a human into a filthy and abused object, unhesitatingly enduring vile acts. While the shock value of the song is striking in and of itself, Letov leaves no doubts as to who is doing the commanding: the Soviet state. The line “I was ordered – I answered ‘Aye!’” (“Mne veleli – ia otvetil ‘est’!”) is a distortion of a popular slogan referencing the heroics and loyalty of the Komsomol: “The Party ordered – the Komsomol answered ‘Aye!’” (“Partiia velela – komsomol otvetil ‘est’!”). Once more, Letov portrays the dictates of the Soviet state in an exaggerated light, more ridiculous than they are morally reprehensible. If the regime’s commands are absurd, he seems to suggest, then so too is the extent of its subjects’ acquiescence.

Letov employs a similar hyperbolic style in reference to his lyrical subjects’ enthusiasm for Soviet ideological symbols. His “political” songs are populated by references to the color red, the hammer and sickle, and to historical Soviet leaders – perhaps most notably Lenin, whose cult status is treated with Letov’s signature brand of vulgarity in the song “Necrophilia” (“Nekrofiliia”; 1987). The song’s hero is consumed by an obsession with Soviet official symbolism – beginning with the “iron curtain on a red background” (“zheleznyi zanaves na krasnom fone”) – to a degree that turns grotesquely sexual: a desire, bordering on a compulsion, to copulate with Lenin’s rotting corpse that leads him to “stand in line at the mausoleum” each morning. The speaker’s declaration of love for “blue palms” (“golubye ladoni”) and “worm-eaten bodies” (“tela, iz’edey chervém”) serves as testament to his absorption into the system of ideological symbols circulated by the all-powerful state: he carries out the proscribed adoration of Lenin to its extreme and in doing so reveals its absurdity. The individual’s desires

131 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
– even seemingly private matters of sexuality – become intertwined with those of the regime. Moreover, the fact that he stands in line at the mausoleum implies that he is not alone in his carnal desire for Lenin’s body; it is less a matter of perversity and more a patriotic duty. Thus, even the protagonist of “Necrophilia” serves as a quintessential totalitarian subject.

This conception of totalitarian dictatorships’ citizens as incapable of acting outside the discourse of official ideology – a crucial characteristic of both Arendt’s and Friedrich and Brzezinski’s definitions of totalitarianism – is also notable in the context of Letov’s frequent allusions to Soviet popular songs and slogans. A particularly curious example of this tendency is visible in the song “Red Banner” (“Krasnoe znamia”; 1987). Unlike the vast majority of the songs performed by Grazhdanskaia Oborona, “Red Banner” was not penned by Letov himself; rather, it is an adaptation, nearly word-for-word, of a patriotic poem by the popular-song lyricist Vadim Semernin, set to a punk-rock tempo and punctuated with Letov’s shouts of “khoi!”.

Thus, when the speaker of Letov’s version of “Red Banner” declares his desire to hold aloft the “red banner of [his] fathers and grandfathers” (“krasnoe znamia dedov i otsov”), he is quite literally speaking the language of the dominant ideology instituted by Soviet power. In the context of totalitarianism theory, Letov’s usage of existing propagandistic materials thus seems to confirm the impression that his subjects, like the citizens of totalitarian regimes, have been deprived of their own lexicon. For the subject of “Red Banner” communist ideology has become “internalized,” as Friedrich and Brzezinski describe in Totalitarian Dictatorships and Autocracy, to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from the speaker’s own thoughts, a subconscious conformity at the level of language itself. At the same time, Letov’s seeming patriotic enthusiasm appears at odds with the song’s punk style, conjuring associations with Alexei

135 Friedrich and Brzezinski, 26.
Yurchak’s concept of *stiob*, a peculiarly Soviet brand of mockery: an “overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which [it] was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two.”\textsuperscript{136} Thus, while the lyrical subject of “Red Banner” has internalized communist ideology, the song’s punk aesthetic casts doubt on whether Letov has done so himself – and if so, how sincerely.

While the speaker in “Red Banner” relays official rhetoric without adding his own explicit doubts, many of Letov’s lyrical subjects appear more aware of their entrapment within the language of the state. In such songs, the speaker affirms their allegiance to the Soviet system and its values but at the same time is acutely aware of the contradiction between the Party’s promises of a glorious future and the realities of stagnation, repression, and symbols so inescapable that they have been stripped of meaning. This pattern is particularly notable in “Everything is Going According to Plan” (“*Vsë idët po planu*”; 1988), by far the most well-known song of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*. While the speaker praises the progress of *perestroika* and calls the hammer and sickle emblazoned on his army cap “touching” (“*trogatel’no*”), this hardly seems a display of rapturous patriotism in light of his hesitation to “participate in war games” (“*uchastvovat’ v voennoi igre*”) and his declaration that all leaders since Lenin were “total shit” (“*takoe der’mo*”).\textsuperscript{137} Yet in spite of these lingering doubts in the Soviet government, the speaker remains stubbornly convinced of the Party’s assurances of a radiant communist future:

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А при коммунизме всё будет заебись
Он наступит скоро — надо только подождать
Там всё будет бесплатно — там всё будет в кайф
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\textsuperscript{136} Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, 250.
\textsuperscript{137} Letov, “*Vsë idët po planu,*” https://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056899068.html.
Там наверное вообще не надо будет умирать
Я проснулся среди ночи и понял, что
Всё идёт по плану.\textsuperscript{138}

But under communism everything will be fucking great
It will come soon – we just have to wait a little
Everything will be free then, everyone will feel good
And probably no one at all will have to die
I woke up in the middle of the night and realized that
Everything is going according to plan.

While the subject of “Everything is Going According to Plan” relays his uncertainties in
the present-day regime, his rhetoric remains confined to that of utopian Party doctrine, and the
familiar Bakhtinian double-voiced discourse turns somber. The speaker becomes an ideal
totalitarian subject brought to a level of tragedy: he is aware of the contradictions between
official ideology and the surrounding reality, but in the absence of a discourse infiltrated by the
state’s doctrine, he lacks a language to express his discontent.

In these earlier compositions of his “political” period, Letov explores the idea of the
elimination of the self under a totalitarian regime – a theme central to traditional theories of
totalitarianism but especially prevalent in the writings of the Soviet dissidents. If the destruction
of the personality was for the dissidents a moral affront, in Letov’s earlier works the extent of
citizens’ conformity to the Soviet state and its system of ideological symbolism was more
ridiculous than tragic, bizarre and at times obscene. Yet in the latter years of \textit{Grazhdanskaia
Oborona’s} politically critical height – 1988 and 1989 – Letov began to treat the elimination of
individual autonomy as a source not only of mockery but of existential horror.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
Here, the motifs of Letov’s earlier works – ever-present symbols, fervent patriotism, repetitious slogans – remain, but the subsuming of the individual into the state, heretofore implied, is made explicit. Nowhere is this more striking than in the 1989 song “Great and Eternal,” discussed earlier in this chapter. Amidst the “roar of national anthems” (“shchedro gromykhnuli gosudarstvennye gimny”), Lenin’s insistence on the dominance of the Party (“Partiia – um, chest’, i sovest’ epokhi”), and promises of spring (“obeshchaet byt’ vesna dolgor”), the individuals at the center of the song have been ostensibly eliminated in that they no longer exist as anything but the regime’s subjects.\(^{139}\) The song’s second and final verses end with a chilling proclamation: “we don’t exist, we don’t exist, we don’t exist, WE DON’T EXIST!” (“nas net, nas net, nas net, NAS NET!”).\(^ {140}\) This negation of the individual – the “internalization” of ideology – occurs almost unnoticed; a glorious and fertile spring awaits, but no free people will be there to greet it.

If this elimination of the individual is, as Letov’s songs suggest, a central component of the totalitarian regime, then the question arises: to what end? In his musical works during the final years of the Soviet Union, Letov appears to arrive at a similar answer to Arendt: by creating citizens whose identities have been wholly consumed by state ideology, a totalitarian dictatorship supplies itself with a population willing to commit extremes of violence. Under totalitarian dictatorships, Arendt writes, human beings are made “superfluous,” valued only for their ability to carry out the state’s will; they are at once both the concentration camp guards sending millions to their deaths and their unquestioning victims.\(^ {141}\) The former type of subject – a steadfast citizen prepared to slaughter his fellow men in the name of the state – becomes a central figure in

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\(^{139}\) Letov, “Zdorovo i vechno.”

\(^{140}\) Ibid.

\(^{141}\) Arendt, 459.
Letov’s songs of the late 1980s. An early example of this motif can be found in the song “Ravings,” discussed earlier in this chapter:

Под знаменем Ильича — мы раздавим тебя, как врага
И я буду стоять среди них — я хочу быть таким, как все

Under the banner of Il’ich, we’ll crush you like an enemy
And I’ll stand among them – I want to be like everyone else

Here, the speaker observes violence of which he is not yet a part – but that he acknowledges will allow him unity with the members of the collective around him, who unhesitatingly engage in the state’s brutality. A similar admiration of others’ willingness to commit murderous acts on behalf of the political order is expressed by the subject of “Combat Impulse” (“Boevoi stimul”; 1988), who is captivated by his “faceless comrade’s” violent tendencies: the “impulse to sully,” “catch,” “punish,” and “kill.” Perhaps most ominously, Letov seems to suggest that the desire to carry out the state’s ruthless commands inevitably emerges even in those who declare their opposition to it. The hero of “Excellent Song” (“Prevoskhodnaia pesnia”; 1989), once inclined to “criticize the sovdep” (“rugat’ sovdep”), transforms over the course of the song into a willing participant in state violence:

Медленно, но верно, весело и страшно
Я становлюсь превосходным солдатом

Slowly but surely, merrily and terrifyingly,
I’ll become an excellent soldier.

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142 Letov, “Bred.”
143 Letov, “Boevoi stimul.”
145 Ibid.
Furthermore, Letov’s work also contains examples of individuals for whom this transition to complete obedience has been completed. The song “The New Patriotic” (“Novaia patrioticheskaia”; 1988) serves as a synthesis of Letov’s motifs surrounding the totalitarian subject: a product of ever-present ideological symbols whose internalization of the state’s rhetoric transforms them into an instrument of the dictatorship’s violent will. Letov introduces the government’s indoctrinary tools – images, slogans – as a means of achieving total control from the song’s beginning; the first two lines, “Ah, the rounds, dust and fog” (“Ekh, dorogi, pyl’ da tuman”) are taken from a wartime tune written by Lev Oshanin. Moreover, the ecstasy of the speaker in the song’s chorus – “we’re taking the flaming path to communism” (“pylaiushchei tropoi my idëm k kommunizmu”) – suggests that the subject has internalized the propagandistic symbols, slogans, and songs that surround him. Accordingly, he is subsumed into a faceless “we” capable of executing by firing squad “all who oppose” the communist ideology. Here, totalitarianism is a distinctly perestroika-era phenomenon: the speaker acknowledges youth protests in Alma-Ata and “events” in Poland but insists that they remain “unafraid” of this possibility that the Soviet state has not achieved its ambition of complete unanimity. Like the dissidents of the 1970s, Letov thus acknowledges total control of the individual and the ensuing bloodshed as a threat not limited to the Stalinist past.

As an antidote to these signs of rebellion, the speaker announces a return to old forms of mass brutality – and not only those of Stalin. “For incorrigible dissenters like Lech Wałęsa,” the speaker declares, “we’ll open up a new Buchenwald and Auschwitz” (“dlia matëryi kontry vrode [230x132]http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056910262.html. Oshanin was a poet and lyricist whose works earned him the Stalin Prize in 1950.

147 Protests in December of 1986 that followed Gorbachev’s dismissal of the ethnically Kazakh First Secretary of the Community Party in Kazakhstan and replacement by a Russian.

148 Likely a reference to the resistance activities of the labor union Solidarity, led by Lech Wałęsa.

149 Letov, “Novaia patrioticheskaia.”
This is especially relevant in light of the fact that purveyors of the totalitarian model – particularly the Soviet dissidents – applied the epithet “totalitarian” to fascist and communist regimes alike. For the dissidents, equating the communist government with Nazi Germany was an especially effective means of condemning the Soviet project. “The New Patriotic” thus unites Letov’s depictions of totalitarian subjects both with those of scholars such as Arendt and with the Soviet dissidents who utilized the totalitarian model to their own ends. Totalitarianism, the song seems to suggest, produces individuals eager to enact fascistic violence in the name of a communist future.

The subjects of Letov’s anti-Soviet compositions, therefore, are entrapped within a system that leaves them either physically or mentally destroyed, either slaughtered as enemies of the communist future or absorbed wholly into the apparatus of state violence. Like the speaker of “Great and Eternal,” their very existence is negated by the force of official ideology over each aspect of their daily lives. All attempts at rebellion are squelched and transformed into slavish compliance with the regime’s inhumanity and unthinking participation in its vicious campaigns. The capability of a totalitarian regime to alter its citizens’ psyche – to change human nature – appears to have preoccupied Letov just as it did the Soviet dissidents of the 1970s. In a totalitarian state where partaking in the government’s violence was the inevitable result of pervasive ideological campaigning, there seemed to be no alternative but for the entire populace to become complicit in its aims of total control. This idea – that “we all approve of totalitarianism” (“my vse odobriaem totalitarizm”) – is perhaps the most crucial conclusion of Letov’s political compositions of the late 1980s. “We all approve of totalitarianism,” his work suggests, because we are left without an alternative.

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150 Ibid.
151 Letov, “Totalitarizm.”
In this chapter, we have seen how the concept of totalitarianism is central to the “anti-Soviet” musical output of Egor Letov in the project *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* between 1987 and 1989. Letov’s incorporation of the theory of totalitarianism into his songs is visible not only in direct references to the Soviet Union as a totalitarian regime but more generally in his depictions of the state and its subjects. In Letov’s songs, an image emerges of a government which either possesses total power or aspires to it despite all pretensions at reform or attempts to distance itself from past acts of mass terror. His work is particularly fixated on the implications of this complete control on individuals and their capacity for independent thought and action. The subjects of Letov’s songs are subsumed by the state’s elaborate scheme of ideological symbols and consequently become unconscious participants in its violence. Both the use of the theory of totalitarianism and this fixation upon the plight of the individual place Letov in a continuation with the Soviet dissidents of the preceding generation, whose moral appeals against the Soviet government decried the lack of personal autonomy which it allowed its citizens.

Yet despite their usage of common theory, Letov and the dissidents of the 1970s used the term “totalitarian” to different ends. For the dissidents, totalitarianism was a moral outrage that could be remedied by Western-style democracy; for Letov, who had long expressed discontent with *perestroika* and embraced communism after the fall of the Soviet Union, democratic reforms could not provide a simple escape from the impulses that led people to carry out violence against one another. In the following chapter, through a continued analysis of Letov’s musical texts alongside his comments in interviews and articles, I argue that Letov intentionally drew upon preexisting ideas of protest in the Soviet Union, manipulating and undermining the image of the Soviet dissident in order to demonstrate a more complex existential rebellion.
Chapter Three:  
“"I Will Always Be Against”': From Antitotalitarianism to Universal Rebellion

In 1994, Egor Letov gave one of his most politically incendiary interviews – this time, rather than among his fellow Siberian punk rockers, on national television. The Soviet Union had dissolved three years before, and Letov, once infamous for his attacks on the communist regime, had seemingly reversed his course and joined the National Bolsheviks, a notorious political party that united radicals of the far left and right. Acts of terror associated with the party would lead to its banning in Russia as an extremist organization in 2007. The night before his interview on the Russian state television broadcast Programma A, Letov and Grazhdanskaia Oborona played a stadium concert under the party’s banner, a mixture of the flag of Nazi Germany and that of the Soviet Union in which the swastika of the former was replaced by the hammer and sickle. Though the group performed some of their Soviet-era “hits” – notably “Everything is Going According to Plan,” whose insistence that “under communism everything will be fucking great” suddenly seemed more genuine than rancorous – the concert ended not with a Grazhdanskaia Oborona song but with a rousing rendition of the patriotic Soviet tune “And Once More the Battle Goes On” (“I vnov’ prodolzhaetsia boi”; 1974), written by Aleksandra Pakhmutova and Nikolai Dobronravov:

И вновь продолжается бой
И сердцу тревожно в груди
И Ленин такой молодой
И юный октябрь впереди!
And once more the battle goes on
And the heart trembles with anticipation

152 “"I vsegda budu protiv." Letov, “Protiv.”
And Lenin is so young
And youthful October is ahead!

The interview that followed was just as contentious – if not more, since it allowed Letov the opportunity to elaborate on the political stances his concert had indicated the night before. Despite the interviewer’s attempts to keep guest call-ins flowing, Letov repeatedly interrupted, launching into explanations of his creative process or his views on fascism. When asked if he had anything to say to his “opponents” who might be scandalized at his presence on state television, Letov quoted Mayakovsky’s famous injunction against capitalist exploiters as an indication of the coming class war: “Eat your pineapples, chew your grouse / Your last day is coming, bourgeois!” (“Esh’anany, riabchikov zhui / Den’tvoi poslednii prikhodit, burzhui!”). Most importantly, however, the incorporation of phoned-in questions from the public afforded listeners of Grazhdanskaia Oborona a rare chance to communicate directly with Letov and to voice their discontent with – or approval of – his allegiance to the National Bolshevik Party. Why, many wondered, had such an iconically “anti-Soviet” figure refused to take the path of liberal democracy and taken up the communist cause? “Egor,” one caller inquired, “you used to be an ardent opponent of the communists, and now you yourself are with them. How can you explain that?”

Letov’s answer provides a particularly illuminating window into his political approach. “I was never an opponent of communism,” he declared:

The trouble is that when we began our struggle – that was in 1984 – there was total certainty that that Brezhnev-era regime of ‘sanitarium discipline’ would go on for a long

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153 The more-or-less literal translation is mine and unfortunately does not retain the rhythm or end rhyme of the original.
154 Agranovskii, "Egor Letov: Russkii proryv."
155 The year Letov founded Grazhdanskaia Oborona.
time.\textsuperscript{156} We fought against it not for the sake of democracy and, of course, not for the sake of capitalism, but for the triumph of true communist ideals, which had been discredited in the last years of Soviet power.\textsuperscript{157}

On one hand, to those who doubted the sincerity of his political affiliations, it would have seemed natural that Letov, now performing under the flag of a communist-aligned political party, would attempt to assert some kind of continuity between his earlier works lashing out against the Soviet system and his present-day hatred of then-president Boris Yeltsin. On the other hand, to dismiss Letov’s rejection of liberalism as a mere product of his partisan involvement would overlook his anti-democratic tendencies that existed well before his ties to the National Bolsheviks – or, for that matter, the collapse of the Soviet Union. His manipulation of existing paradigms of political rebellion, particularly that of the liberal and Western-focused dissidents of the 1960s and 70s, had long been established in his work, a fact that he emphasized in interviews and written commentary throughout the latter half of the 1980s. Furthermore, Letov’s unique conceptualization of antitotalitarianism as a continuous existential struggle provides a lens through which one can analyze his creative output in a new light – not as a continuation of traditional Soviet dissent but as a break from it. In this context, his political stances in the 1990s become less paradoxical; their radicalism lies not only in party affiliations but in the rejection of the idealized image of the liberal activist. In demonstrating Letov’s unique approach to politics and its application to his music, I seek to accentuate his intentional modification of paradigms of liberal dissidence and his subversion of typical ideas of what it meant for an individual in the Soviet Union to be “against.”

\textsuperscript{156} The formulation “regime of ‘sanitarium discipline’ [distsiplinarno-sanatomyi rezhim],” was, according to another interview by Letov also dating to December 1994, devised by the head of the National Bolshevik Party, Eduard Limonov. See S. Sokolkin et al., “Proryv-94. Rok: russkoe sprotivlienie” (Zavtra no. 2, 1994), www.gr-oborona.ru/pub/anarhi/1056978837.html.
\textsuperscript{157} Agranovskii, “Egor Letov: Russkii proryv.” Emphasis mine.
Before an analysis of Letov’s views as expressed in his writings and interviews, however, I find it crucial to reiterate why I have elected to examine his self-descriptions of his approach to politics. The aim of this thesis is not to explain away Letov’s involvement with a dubious political party or to create any kind of definitive label for his political beliefs; nor is it to treat his interpretation of his own songs as the single correct lens through which the work of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* should be viewed. While I consider Letov’s statements on the nature of political power and its existential implications as a fruitful and oft-overlooked framework for the analysis of his creativity, to take Letov’s explanations as doctrine would end with a return to the dangerous terrain of depoliticizing *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, making Letov’s work more palatable to an audience uncomfortable with his political extremes. Instead, my aim in discussing Letov’s political statements is first and foremost to demonstrate his ability to subvert existing ideas of what it meant to defy Soviet power, a maneuver I regard as an inherently radical act.

In this chapter, I survey Letov’s commentary on the political elements of his work from 1987 to 1989 in order to trace a genealogy of his self-construction as a fundamentally illiberal dissident and as a manipulator of preexisting conceptions of political defiance. I begin by drawing attention to Letov’s commentary in 1980s-era interviews on his pessimistic attitude toward democracy and his idiosyncratic formulation of totalitarianism less as a descriptor for authoritarian regimes and more as a ubiquitous existential condition – while at the same time balancing this existentialism with radical politics. Next, I examine Letov’s application of this concept to his musical work – namely, how he conceived of his creative activity as an ongoing battle against “totalitarianism of the mind.” Finally, I return to an analysis of the texts of Letov’s “anti-Soviet” songs, but rather than searching for his validations of existing theories of totalitarianism, I attempt to read them through his own more existential framework.
“Totalitarianism in All Its Manifestations”: Letov as Illiberal Dissident

In the previous chapter, we have seen the ways in which Letov’s creative output through *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* in the late 1980s reflect established rhetoric of a “totalitarian” Soviet Union: a ruling party imposing an all-encompassing ideology upon its subjects, depriving them of all opportunities both for independent political activity and for personal autonomy. Amidst an incessant torrent of slogans and propaganda, in the face of ubiquitous surveillance, the totalitarian lyrical subject is wholly absorbed into the state to the degree that they are incapable of distinguishing their own desires from that which they have been commanded to do, a system of reflexes that culminates in the individual’s unquestioning participation in the government’s horrific acts of violence. Overall, this motif of the eradication of the individual aligns neatly with predominant conceptions of totalitarianism as discussed in Chapter One – conceptions employed both by Cold-War-era scholars in the West and by a generation of dissidents in the Soviet Union who sought to contrast the political system of their own country with the liberal democracies to which they appealed for aid.

Accordingly, if one were to judge Letov’s musical texts alone – that is to say, as poetry – it would be relatively easy to conclude that because he portrayed the Soviet Union as a totalitarian regime striving for complete conformity, the only cure he could advocate would be Western democracy, as did the dissidents. However, an examination of Letov’s political commentary in the twilight years of Soviet power – namely, through his numerous interviews – reveals that his conception of totalitarianism was far more nuanced than a simple epithet to be cast upon the Soviet government. Rather, for Letov, the concept of totalitarianism becomes a

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158 “Totalitarizm vo vsekh ego proiavleniakh.” Letov et al., “Panki v svoём krugu.”
means through which to express doubt in democracy, serving as both the foundation of a broader existential approach and an intentional subversion of traditional dissident rhetoric.

Undoubtedly, it would be a drastic oversimplification to analyze the politics of Letov’s musical works without reference to his interviews. Indeed, for an individual who stubbornly resisted all attempts to be co-opted by the forces of *perestroika*-era popular culture, Letov produced an impressive amount of commentary on his own works, whether through statements made in the intervals between songs in a concert program or through his interviews and articles circulated by rock zines. As written sources intended for a more lasting public circulation than mid-concert comments, Letov’s interviews and articles are a particularly fascinating source of context for his musical work both in *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* and associated projects such as *Kommunizm*. In texts such as “*Grob-khroniki,*” an exhaustive review of the discography of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* and the side projects of its associated musicians that originally appeared in the zine *Kont Ku’l URA*, Letov seems above all insistent on relaying a correct version of his creativity – that is, outlining definitively the circumstances under which his songs were created and providing retrospective criticism and praise of his music.\(^{159}\) Thus, considering the importance Letov placed on creating context for his songs, any analysis of the musical output of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* without reference to Letov’s own commentary would be incomplete, whether or not one takes such commentary at face value.

In interviews dating back to the late Soviet years, we find that Letov’s anti-democratic tendencies were well established long before his involvement with the National Bolshevik Party – indeed, long before the party had even been founded. Letov’s 1987 interview with Roman Neumoev of the band Survival Guide, discussed briefly at the opening of Chapter Two, is

especially illuminating on this topic. It takes only a few minutes for politics to enter the
conversation between Letov and the Tiumen' punk rockers, who press him on his views. “Do you
believe in democracy? That is, is it possible?” Neumoev asks. After a pause, when Letov
responds doubtfully – “No, to be honest, I don’t” – Neumoev puts forth a hypothetical scenario:
“Let’s say we crush totalitarianism. For what? For the sake of democracy?” Again, Letov
responds with doubt: “I don’t believe it.”

Here, Letov’s skepticism with democracy expresses itself clearly on multiple levels: it is
not only unfeasible but also undesirable. Considering that Letov was at the time producing some
of his most notoriously “anti-Soviet” work, this sentiment is particularly striking. Within his
music, as discussed in Chapter Two, Letov draws upon a common rhetoric of antitotalitarianism
that places his work in conversation with that of the Soviet dissidents of the 1960s and 70s –
dissidents who utilized theories of totalitarianism in order to appeal to the values of
Western-style liberal democracy and individual freedom. The contradiction that emerges between
the seeming antitotalitarianism of Letov’s “political” songs of the late 1980s and his lack of faith
in democracy thus opens the door to an intriguing possibility: that rather than unproblematically
applying existing concepts of totalitarianism to his own work as a continuation of the dissident
struggle for democracy, Letov appropriates the concept of totalitarianism as a demonstration of
an illiberal form of rebellion, one for whom democracy would be far too simple of a conclusion.

Moreover, Letov’s unusual idea of totalitarianism places him even further away from his
liberal predecessors. Although Letov defines himself as an “anarchist,” he remains convinced

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160 Letov et al., “Pank v svoém krugu.”
161 Ibid. As noted at the beginning of Chapter Two, the transcription of the conversation makes slight but
critical alterations to the recorded version; in the transcription, Neumoev says, “Let’s say totalitarianism is
crushed” (“Dopustim, totalitarizm sokrushen”), not specifying who has done the crushing, while in the
recorded version, he places the responsibility for the downfall of the totalitarian regime on a collective,
perhaps those gathered: “Let’s say we crush totalitarianism” (“Dopustim, sokrushaem totalitarizm”).
be eliminated. “You can’t crush power [cokrushit’ vlast nel’zia],” Letov explains, “because totalitarianism is embedded deep within the human consciousness itself [v samom chelovecheskom soznanii totalitarizm zalozhen sovershenno чёtko]. Therefore, the game is lost in advance.” In the context of Letov’s portrayal of totalitarian subjects as absorbed completely into the will of the state, this statement initially seems ambiguous. On one hand, Letov seems to introduce a definition of totalitarianism far different from the established one: it is not a term for a particular system of government but rather a description of a general human state of being. On the other hand, the idea of a totalitarian regime’s ability to embed itself in the mind of its subjects is a common subject both in the works of the liberal Soviet dissidents as well as Letov’s “anti-Soviet” songs. Yet the possibility for the latter interpretation – that this “totalitarianism of the mind” is a product specifically of Soviet power – is closed off by Letov’s assertion that democracy cannot exist “on a global scale,” since “totalitarianism is embedded in the human consciousness from the very beginning [iznachal’no].”

With this statement, Letov distances himself unambiguously from his dissident predecessors, who accentuated, much as Letov did in his own songs, the ability of totalitarian regimes to implant their ideology into their citizens, reducing them to obedient instruments of state violence. The totalitarian state of being, he suggests, is not imposed by any particular government; it is present in all people, both in and outside the Soviet Union. In distinguishing his understanding of totalitarianism from that of past social activists, Letov unequivocally distances himself from the paradigm of Soviet dissidents bemoaning the lack of independent thought in their own country and looking toward Western democracy as a source of individual autonomy.

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162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
All this, of course, begs the question: if totalitarianism for Letov is not a system of
government or its reverberations in the minds of its subjects, to what sort of totalitarianism does
he refer? Here again he provides a characteristically idiosyncratic – and evasive – answer. After
Letov pronounces that the central aim of his musical activity is to “fight back against
totalitarianism [dat’ otpor totalitarizmu]... in all its manifestations,” Neumoev inquires, “What is
it you’re trying to destroy?”①⑤ Rather than providing a straightforward target – for example,
Soviet power – Letov declares that he seeks to destroy “any totalitarianism, both in thought and
in relation to some kind of human ties, especially in relation to the state [liuboi totalitarizm, kak
v myshlenii, tak i v otnoshenii kakikh-to chelovechesikh sviazei, tem bolee v gosudarstvennykh
otnosheniiakh].”①⑥

The subject of “human ties” is, on the surface, frustratingly vague, but when coupled with
the reference to the state – and understood in a context of Letov’s musical creativity – an image
of a non-state-specific totalitarianism begins to emerge. Totalitarianism, Letov claims, is innate
in the human consciousness and prevents democracy from taking hold on a universal level. Thus,
Letov’s totalitarianism retains the motif of lack of individual will but divests the blame from any
particular government. Letov thereby indicates that the tendencies toward hatred, mercilessness,
and violence that preoccupy so many of his songs during this period, which appear initially to
reflect a condemnation of the Soviet regime, are in fact manifestations of a deeper existential
dilemma: people, he seems to suggest, are naturally inclined to create systems of autocratic
power over one another, regardless of the form of government under which they live. Here, his
reference to individuals’ “relation to the state” is less paradoxical than it initially seems. If the
state, as Max Weber famously asserted, can be defined by its “monopoly of the legitimate use of

①⑤ Ibid.
①⑥ Ibid.
physical force,” then political power offers individuals a legally-sanctioned means of satisfying their urges for violence and domination over one another. Consequently, for Letov, attacking the state becomes a convenient frame through which to criticize a broader “totalitarian” tendency on the part of all human beings.

This depoliticized definition of a politically fraught term appears in some sense contradictory, given Letov’s later radical activity – a crucial dilemma I return to at the end of this section. However, the conception of totalitarianism as a lens provides Letov with the means of drawing a continuous line of thought between his “anti-Soviet” creative activity and his pro-communist beliefs in the early 1990s. In a late 1994 interview accompanied by Roman Neumoev and Sergei Zharikov, leader of the legendary Moscow band DK, Letov reiterates not only his allegiance to the supposedly “true communism” of the National Bolshevik Party but also his philosophy on the role of politics in art. When the interviewer, Vladimir Bondarenko, claims that in “normal times” artists only seek recourse in politics for selfish reasons, Letov protests that “the purest creativity is inherently political.” “Politics can’t be separated from the non-political [politiku ot nepolitiki nevozmozhno otdelit’],” he insists; “everything is politics.” In a way, this statement is the reverse side of the same coin to Letov’s earlier arguments. If the totalitarianism inborn in the human consciousness manifests itself most prominently in relation to the state, as he proposes during the Soviet period, then any form of art dealing with the human condition has political implications, whether they are explicit or implicit.

In his further statements, Letov elaborates this stance: “Songs aren’t written for eternity or into eternity [ne dlia vechnosti i ne v vechnost’], but for the present moment,” he declares.

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“The present moment is a piece of eternity, a moment of eternity.”169 Music, Letov asserts, is not created in a vacuum and is therefore bound to reflect the social and political context in which it emerges. Yet at the same time, if genuine art represents “a moment of eternity,” it must also speak to a broad existential condition, a viewpoint that coincides with his earlier statements on “antitotalitarianism” – though he may oppose a particular government, his opposition reveals a deeper human tendency. This attempt to engage in fleeting political struggles as a method of criticizing something more universal allows Letov to establish a continuity between two seemingly disparate periods of his creativity: the “anti-Soviet” and the “pro-communist.”

Overall, Letov’s interviews both from the 1980s and the 1990s provide crucial context for his creative work and his apparent ideological reversal – namely, he establishes a conceptualization of totalitarianism that exceeds the bounds of the term’s typical definition. If totalitarianism is, roughly speaking, not a state but a state of being, then a simple regime change cannot eliminate it. Though “totalitarianism in thought and human ties” may express itself most prominently in the sphere of politics, the totalitarian condition of mind is not a consequence of an autocratic state system but its impetus. The typical outlook of the Soviet dissidents – totalitarian communist power countered by Western-style democracy and personal liberation – no longer suffices. Here, we begin to delve into perhaps the most vital theme of Letov’s political involvement: his subversion of entrenched ideas of rebellion in the Soviet Union, a subversion which he demonstrates to be deliberate through his commentary on his work. Thus, we can now turn to the practical application of Letov’s ideas: how he sought to reflect this fight against “totalitarianism in all its manifestations” in his musical work.

169 Ibid.
“Rebellion as the Only Path”: Music Against Metaphysical Totalitarianism

Thus far, we have discussed Letov’s political thought as philosophy, applying it primarily to the circumstances of his life, an attempt by Letov to draw a line of continuity between the image of the anti-Soviet radical and the pro-communist rebel. However, Letov’s primary political contribution was not through direct action against either the Soviet regime or the Yeltsin government. Rather, the “front” of his antitotalitarian struggle was first and foremost that of creative activity: music. In 1987, when Letov declared that all his actions were “a fight against totalitarianism in all its manifestations,” he had his own work in Grazhdanskaia Oborona in mind: “Everything I can do with my songs is to fight back against totalitarianism.”

Having considered Letov’s idiosyncratic conception of totalitarianism – a condition of the human consciousness that, although it manifests itself in state power, is not a product of any government – the question arises: how did Letov demonstrate his defiance not only of totalitarianism in the traditional sense but of a deeper “totalitarianism of the mind”?

To examine Letov’s practical application of this idea, we can turn to another of his commentaries, this time far less conventional than a televised interview or a tableside discussion with his fellow punk rockers: the 1990 interview-of-sorts entitled, after a Grazhdanskaia Oborona song, “Bon Appetit!” (“Priiatnogo appetita!”). In a sense, it is impossible to call this text an interview, as Letov responds not to an outsider’s inquiries but to questions of his own devising; he is both the interviewer and the interviewed. Thus, this text is a truly unique source, schizophrenic in the most stereotypical sense of the word, in which Letov, simultaneously occupying the position of the questioner and the questioned, attempts to seize control over the interpretation of his creative works in the face of the predatory apparatus of mass culture.

171 Letov et al., “Panki v svo’e m krugu.”
Letov’s first question to himself sets the tone of the interview to come, replete with his usual bombastic language. When the “questioner” inquires why he has decided to go through with the interview, Letov laments the “distortion” of his works both by critics and ordinary listeners: “The situation right now is so fucked up that if you don’t speak for yourself, they’ll inevitably speak out for you. And then it will be far too late, or at least difficult to fix.” Letov thus asserts that the interpretation of his work to follow is the true one and contextualizes the “distortion” of his music in the chaotic cultural environment of the Soviet Union’s final months. As an individual whose work up until this point had been characterized as anti-Soviet, the dissolution of Soviet power represented a profound upheaval in Letov’s perception by the public and the popular-culture system he saw as seeking to co-opt him. The interview, unconventional though it may be, therefore becomes not ridiculous but necessary.

Though much of the interview is devoted to the system of “greedy mass entertainment” (“zhadnoi massovoi razvlekukhi”) supposedly seeking to devour Grazhdanskaia Oborona, “Bon Appetit!” contains Letov’s most straightforward application of his idea of universal human totalitarianism to his musical creativity. In particular, the “interviewer” points out that Grazhdanskaia Oborona has ceased its concert activities and its leader has turned from political to “metaphysical” themes. Responding to the question – “Why, until relatively recently, were there so many political themes in your songs?” – Letov effectively unites his conceptualization of existential totalitarianism with the seemingly traditional totalitarian subjects of his work:

Politics in my songs (“Everything Is Going According to Plan” and so on) isn’t politics at all, at least not really politics in the full sense of the word [...] For me all the totalitarian categories and realities I use are images, symbols of an eternal, metaphysical

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totalitarianism, embedded in the very essence of [...] any society, and also in the world order itself.\textsuperscript{173}

Within this statement is an underlying implication: that the hallmarks of Soviet totalitarianism discussed in the previous chapter as an integral part of Letov’s musical work in the late 1980s are not what they seem to be. This idea takes on its full significance when Letov links his use of “images and symbols” to his defiance of the Soviet system and the mass culture it produces:

Each time you have to invent a new audacity that doesn’t fit into any tolerable framework at that moment. A new outrage. Then, from 1984 to 1988, the ammunition was Soviet totalitarian symbols, punk rock, swearing, and deliberately foul performance [...] Now they’ve been replaced by a new strategy, a new tactic, a new weapon, a new form of war. But the essence of opposition, the essence of predatory active resistance is still the same – because all the same, always and everywhere, we’re the ice under the major’s feet,\textsuperscript{174} no matter whose guise he takes, no matter through whom he acts.\textsuperscript{175}

What has heretofore been implied now becomes explicit. By redefining totalitarianism in an existential sense rather than political sense, while at the same time portraying a traditionally “totalitarian” Soviet Union, Letov intentionally manipulates existing discourse of Soviet-era political rebellion. Before, we have analyzed Letov’s portrayals of totalitarian subjects on a surface level, informed largely by the theories of Western Cold War-era scholars that inspired the liberal activism of a generation of Soviet dissidents. In this sense, Letov seems to express a similar discontent with Soviet power and its destructive effects on the individual personality. Now, however, Letov compels his listeners to radically reinterpret his use of “totalitarian

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid. \
\textsuperscript{174} A reference to the Grazhdanskaia Oborona song “My – lêd.” See Chapter One. \
\textsuperscript{175} Letov, “Priiatnogo appetita!”. Emphasis mine.
symbols” – omnipresent ideological signaling through slogans, patriotic marches, flags, the hammer and sickle – not as straightforward condemnations of Soviet power but as a manifestation of a more profound existential struggle. His use of the lexicon of antitotalitarianism does not place him among the Soviet dissidents; rather, he problematizes their rhetoric, a provocative technique by which the public, already attuned toward an established language of anti-Soviet dissent, could gain a window into a phenomenon more universal than a single oppressive government. Through his musical work, Letov thus draws on the language of liberal protest only to deliberately subvert it for his own aims – aims which do not end in visions of victorious democracy.

Furthermore, Letov appears to have conceived of his “anti-Soviet” stance as a reflection of a universal existential struggle long before his alignment with the National Bolshevik Party. In his “Creative-Political Autobiography” for the National Bolshevik newspaper *Limonka* in early 1995, Letov refers once more to his anti-Sovietism as metaphor:

I never sympathized with democrats, that is, with the bourgeoisie. The war we waged in 1987 was above all a transcendent struggle. The fact is that I’ve always striven to push the situation to its limit, to the moment where you are threatened with death [...] Only in that state can you know whether you’re really worth something, whether you can do something – in a state of war, when you’re hanging on by a thread [...] Then [in 1987] it was necessary to act as outrageously as possible so they’d have no choice but to start imprisoning you, killing you, and so on. Therefore, we immediately began to sing mocking songs about Lenin, communism, and it was nothing more than an unconscious desire to bring the situation to a complete conclusion.176

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Here, aside from reiterating his justification for using established motifs of Soviet dissidence, Letov introduces a new implication to his political approach: no matter the regime, the only meaningful state for a human being is rebellion. In a way, this seems the logical conclusion of his theorization of totalitarianism: if totalitarianism, ultimately rooted in the human consciousness, must be struggled against on a political level, this fight becomes an existential struggle as well, an attempt to “push the situation to its limit,” to face death, to exist in a perpetual “state of war.” Such a sentiment is reflected in Letov’s political commentary of the 1980s as well. In his self-interview “Bon Appetit!,” Letov defines rebellion as “the only FREEDOM. The only JOY. And there is only one freedom – to be against [A svoboda: ona lish’ odna – byt’ protiv].” Anti-Sovietism is thus not merely an attempt at defying a particular ideology or government; it also reflects a desire to break from human nature. Letov thereby frames his musical activity as a broader strategy of expressing an all-encompassing “state of war” against the entire human condition, one that remains just as oppressive no matter what the political system.

If we are to speak of Letov’s concept of “metaphysical totalitarianism,” it is important to recognize that its response – “metaphysical rebellion” – finds a fascinating analogue in the writings of the French existentialist author Albert Camus, most notably in his 1951 work *The Rebel*. Here, Camus expounds upon the human tendency to struggle against one’s own nature, summing it up within the concept of metaphysical rebellion: “the means by which a man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation.” While it is possible to rebel against one’s insufficient material conditions, against a violent regime, or against an unjust and dehumanizing political system, the metaphysical rebel draws deeper existential conclusions.

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177 Letov, “Priiatnogo appetita!” Capitals present in the original.
based on the very existence of injustice in the world, “[protesting] against the human condition in general.” This bears striking similarities to Letov’s remarks on his work as a manifestation of existential struggle: protest against the Soviet system is implicitly tied to a deeper protest against “totalitarianism in thought,” humankind’s tendency toward violence and domination.

Though Camus frames the existential struggle through humankind’s questioning of the existence of God in an unjust world, his concept of “metaphysical rebellion” takes on political implications as well. According to Camus, a broader condemnation of the human condition results from the observation of social injustice, and therefore, “revolution is only the logical consequence of metaphysical rebellion.” This line of thinking is especially relevant to Letov’s formulation of his own “antitotalitarian” struggle. If revolution in the material sense – against the state – naturally arises from rebellion against the human condition as a whole, then it is possible, like Letov, to regard political revolution as a manifestation of a more universal rebellion.

Declaring one’s discontent for a particular governmental or social system, then, is not a means to an end but a symbol. This idea evokes associations with another creative work that combines existential rebellion with political upheaval: Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Demons* (1871-1872). In this novel, the suicide of the rebel Kirilov provides the group of nihilists with an alibi for their brutal murder of Shatov; nevertheless, Kirilov claims that he kills himself not for their benefit but to express his own defiance of human nature. Political rebellion seems just as much of a guise for Letov as it was for Dostoevsky’s doomed character – a comparison that, given Letov’s numerous references to his love of Dostoevsky and his youthful admiration of existentialism, seems particularly appropriate.

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179 Ibid., 29.
180 Ibid., 77.
181 See Letov, “Priatnogo appetita” and Agranovskii for Letov’s admiration of Dostoevsky, and Ivantsov for his existentialist leanings (207).
These existentialist connections, however, also expose multiple contradictions between Letov’s illiberal political activity and his conceptualization of totalitarianism. For one, Letov’s insistence on reading his works as expressions of individual will against a broader human condition seem, bizarrely enough, to place him in parallel with the dissidents, who placed utmost value on personal freedom. How, then, is Letov’s struggle a rejection of the dissident paradigm? The answer lies in the different directions of protest between Letov and the dissidents, as exemplified by their alternative uses of the term “totalitarianism.” The dissidents of the 1960s and 70s, as did the developers of the totalitarian model in the West, held that totalitarianism was at its core an attempt by the regime to alter human nature – to transform individuals, who possessed an inborn yearning for liberty, into mechanisms of state violence. Liberal democracy is thus not only a possibility but an ideal condition for the realization of human potential and autonomy. Letov, however, is less optimistic. His definition of totalitarianism is predicated on a belief that human nature is both unchangeable and inherently violent – that is, oppressive regimes reveal the unpleasant side of human nature rather than changing it. A liberal system of individual autonomy, therefore, can never endure. In short, while the dissidents’ definition of totalitarianism leads to democracy as a solution, Letov’s conception of totalitarianism is intertwined with a clear rejection of democracy.

This radical stance becomes all the more complicated when placed in tandem with Letov’s references to his struggle as fundamentally existential – a move that seems to depoliticize his sharply political musical works. Previous scholars have discussed Letov’s existentialist leanings; Anatolii Korchinskii refers directly to The Rebel as a possible forerunner to his political philosophy.\textsuperscript{182} Existentialism, however, is not without its own political baggage.

The leftist political philosopher Herbert Marcuse famously decried the liberal tendencies of even self-proclaimed Marxist existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre: in its attempt to map “specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics,” existentialism “becomes part of the very ideology which it attacks [...] and its radicalism is illusory.” Accordingly, to treat Letov primarily as an existentialist and his displays of political defiance as mere facades would be to concede to the existing scholarly tendency to wrest an apolitical basis out of his radical musical work and life – in other words, precisely what I have set out not to do.

However, it is crucial to note that Letov’s “existentialism” of the 1980s and early 90s was never divorced from politics. Both during the late Soviet years and the chaotic period following the Soviet Union’s collapse, Letov not only professed radical political beliefs but acted upon them as well through his musical works. Whatever the metaphysical underpinnings of his political engagement, Letov’s radicalism had material consequences. In the 1980s, it provided an ideological center for the Siberian punk scene, while in the 90s, it inspired a wave of dissatisfied youth to join the National Bolsheviks – many of whom even founded bands stylistically similar to Grazhdanskaia Oborona through which they professed their allegiance to “true communism.” Letov’s existential tendencies, therefore, were not apolitical; they were consistently and unapologetically radical. These contradictions thus complicate two paradigms of what might be termed liberal political protest: Soviet dissidence and existentialism.

Nevertheless, Letov’s assertion that his rebellion was not what it seemed to be on the surface presents the question: what happens when political defiance is taken at face value? That is, what happens when the fight against “totalitarianism in all its manifestations” is perceived as

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184 See Rogatchevskii and Steinholt, “Pussy Riot’s Musical Precursors?”. 
a fight against one particular government, expiring upon the regime’s downfall? Letov’s interviews in the 1990s seem to acknowledge this dilemma: “We actually did manage to do what we wanted,” he explains, “but it’s another matter that now it’s indirectly hitting us very hard.” Here, Letov raises a grim possibility that a fundamentally metaphysical rebellion can result in the opposite of one’s intended effect – in this case, the arrival of Yeltsin-era democracy, which Letov unequivocally condemned. This calls to mind another possibility, equally pessimistic: although “being against” might be “the only freedom,” “the only joy,” is the fight against human nature futile? In order to examine these questions, we will turn once more to an analysis of the songs of Grazhdanskaia Oborona – this time, not through the framework of Western scholars, but through the framework of “totalitarianism in all its manifestations” that Letov proposes himself.


In Chapter Two, we undertook an analysis of Letov’s songs in Grazhdanskaia Oborona from the band’s most prominently “anti-Soviet” period – 1987 to 1989 – within the framework of totalitarianism as it has traditionally been defined by Western scholars. Their totalitarian state is a novel type of autocratic regime which through constant surveillance and pervasive propaganda instills its ideology into the populace so completely that its subjects unconsciously commit unthinkable acts of violence on the state’s behalf. Through this framework, we have seen that Letov’s “political” works rely significantly on these established motifs of totalitarianism, placing him in the context of the generation of Soviet dissidents who preceded him. However, having discussed Letov’s own conceptualization of totalitarianism as a metaphysical phenomenon rather than a governmental system, we can now fully examine the insufficiency of this traditional

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185 Letov, "Imenno tak vsë i bylo."
186 “Pri liubom rezhime ia – anarkhist.” Letov, “Novyi tridsat’ sed’moi.”
approach to rebellion within the Soviet Union. If these motifs are for Letov symbols of an
“eternal totalitarianism” of the human consciousness, then the question arises: is Letov’s struggle
against “totalitarianism in all its manifestations” besides that of the state expressed in the songs
of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, and if so, what is the fate of Letov’s existential rebel?

For an analysis of Letov’s rebellious subjects that comes strikingly close to his own
remarks on the difference between metaphysical and state totalitarianism, we can begin by
briefly turning toward Anna Novitskaia’s typology of Letov’s lyrical subjects of the late 1980s:
the “partisan” and the “excellent soldier.”187 In her article on the subjects of *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* during its “political” period, Novitskaia emphasizes the divide between the “material” (*prostranstvo materii*) and the “ideal” (*ideal’noe prostranstvo*) within Letov’s texts.188 Those of
Letov’s lyrical subjects who are preoccupied with the various aspects of material being – daily
life, the body, and most importantly relationships to the state – she categorizes as the “excellent
soldiers” (*prevoskhodnye soldaty*); their attempts at rebellion have been crushed, such as the hero
of “Excellent Song,” and they become absorbed into a futile battle with the state.189 Invariably,
they end up enacting its will, preventing them from transcending the material world.190 On the
other hand, there are the “partisans”: those who strive to transcend the material world through
suicide, madness, and bounds of creativity. Notably, Novitskaia describes these subjects as not
only “anarchists, the fighters against the state system [protiv gosstroia]” but also “the carriers of
the author’s position,” who express Letov’s own existential rebellion and desire to overcome the

reference to the *Grazhdanskaia Oborona* song “The New 1937,” while “excellent soldier” is a reference to
“Excellent Song,” both of which are discussed in Chapter Two.

188 Novitskaia, “Partizan.”

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.
inherent human condition. Yet if we consider Letov’s formulation of political defiance as a manifestation of an existential battle, we are presented with the possibility that these two types of lyrical subjects can exist simultaneously: that in defying state power, Letov’s rebelling subjects also provide a face for a more universal struggle.

Beginning from Letov’s statement on his use of “Soviet totalitarian symbols,” we see that expressions of discontent with the Soviet government are often coupled with larger condemnations of human tendencies toward violence, injustice, and oppression of one another. In the song “Man is a Wolf to Man,” discussed briefly in Chapter Two, Letov introduces a litany of epithets against Soviet power (“red fascism,” “Russian chauvinism,” “Marxism-Leninism”) in tandem with references to Nazism, a parallel that seems to uphold the traditional conception of totalitarianism as an umbrella term unifying the regimes of Stalin and Hitler. In the previous chapter, we discussed these elements more or less at face value – that is, as condemnations of the Soviet system. Yet Letov’s own interpretation – that these political references are also emblems of a greater existential rebellion – has its foundations within the song’s text as well. The song’s final stanza hints at the possibility that the human tendency for violence transcends political and social systems:

Всех объединяет ненависть
Всех объединяет ненависть
Всех объединяет одно желание —
Убивать и насиловать всех иных прочих.
Everyone is united by hatred
Everyone is united by hatred
Everyone is united by one desire —

191 Ibid.
192 Letov, “Chelovek cheloveku – volk.” The reference to Marxism-Leninism appears on the album Nausea (Toshnota); the original version in its place repeats “red fascism” two lines in a row.
To kill and assault everyone else.\textsuperscript{193}

Before, when we analyzed Letov’s songs through the framework of totalitarianism in its usual sense, we regarded violence to be a product of conditioning by the government. The totalitarian subject, the victim of a lifetime’s worth of bombardment of ideologically-driven propaganda at a hyperbolic scale, internalizes the ideals of the state, which become justification for horrific acts towards one’s fellow human beings. Here, however, we are confronted with a more sinister outlook: the desire for violence is inherent, not imbued by a state power. In a traditional framework of totalitarianism, the subject is conditioned; in Letov’s “existential” totalitarianism, where such conditioning is not needed, everyone is a totalitarian subject. A society without the suppression of individual will – the ideal of the dissidents – is thus impossible to achieve, and a political struggle with liberty at its end is futile.

Moreover, the song texts of \textit{Grazhdanskaia Oborona} also support Letov’s statements on this “metaphysical totalitarianism” as manifesting itself most prominently in relations to the state. The band’s “political” songs frequently focus on the tendency of the individual to participate in state violence – not merely as a “totalitarian subject” compelled to do so by the state but out of a deeper desire to exert one’s will over others. Perhaps the most notable example of such a tendency is found in the song “I Don’t Believe in Anarchy” (“\textit{Ia ne veriu v anarkhiiu}”; 1989), which begins with the provocative declaration “Everything that’s not anarchy is fascism” (“\textit{Vsë, chto ne anarkhiia – to fashizm}”).\textsuperscript{194} While this initially seems like a resounding condemnation of all forms of government, the following lines evoke associations with Letov’s view that human beings naturally tend toward systems that exploit one another:

\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{194} Egor Letov, “\textit{Ia ne veriu v anarkhiiu},” https://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1125994644.html.
Но ты хочешь быть фюрером
Он хочет быть фюрером
Я хочу быть фюрером
Мы все хотим быть фюрером -
И я не верю в анархию!195
But you want to be the Führer
He wants to be the Führer
I want to be the Führer
We all want to be the Führer –
And I don’t believe in anarchy!

On a surface level, these lyrics seem to validate the traditional conception of totalitarianism as a form of government encompassing both communist and fascist states. Yet read through Letov’s own framework of “metaphysical totalitarianism,” the lines take on a different implication: human beings’ desire to rule over one another finds convenient satisfaction through state-sanctioned oppression, and this innate characteristic precludes the destruction of “totalitarian” regimes by the promise of democratic reform.

Accordingly, if we are to examine how Letov’s lyrical subjects struggle against this “metaphysical totalitarianism,” we find numerous examples of “metaphysical rebellion” expressing itself as resistance towards all systems of state power. Despite Letov’s condemnations of the Soviet government in no uncertain terms, his songs also contain frequent appeals to universal political defiance, such as the iconic lines of the song “The New 1937”:

При любом Госстрое — я партизан
При любом режиме я — анархист196
Under any Gosstroi I’m a partisan

195 Ibid.
196 Letov, “Novyi tridsat’ sed’moi.”
Under any regime I’m an anarchist

Letov’s “rebelling subject,” therefore, resists not only the Soviet system but any form of state power in general. This sentiment is echoed in the song “Across” (“Poperēk”; 1989), which is structured around the speaker’s calls for universal defiance toward government. All states are portrayed as equally dehumanizing, appealing to the individual’s most “totalitarian” instincts:

Не вейся шестерёнкой в механизме государства
Армейской мясорубке не давай себя сжевать

Don’t be a gear in the mechanism of the state
Don’t let the army meat grinder chew you up

The speaker’s calls for rebellion – that his listeners “respond to all violence with resistance” (“Na vsiakoe nasil’e otvechai soprotivlen’em”) and “harm the supporters of order as much as [they] can” (“Storonnikam poriadka navredi kak mozhno bol’še”) – thus align with Letov’s comments on the pervasive nature of totalitarianism. Regardless of who is in power, the human condition remains equally oppressive – and thus equally worthy of struggling against.

Here, however, we are confronted with a paradox, perhaps the central conflict of Letov’s concept of “metaphysical totalitarianism”: if the tendency toward violence, exploitation, and cruelty cannot be amended by regime changes or the introduction of new ideologies, if totalitarianism is not merely conditioned by oppressive governments but “embedded in the human consciousness,” then what is the point in resisting it at all? Amidst this “totalitarianism of the mind,” does revolt itself become meaningless? For Letov, the situation does not appear so bleak. “Rebellion,” he states, “is the only FREEDOM, the only JOY.” The act of the struggle,

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198 Ibid.
199 Letov, “Priatnogo appetita”.
whether against the government or against something as seemingly immovable as the innate consciousness, provides meaning in and of itself. It seems no coincidence that the communist ideology Letov advocated in both the 1980s and 90s is predicated upon a desire to fight humankind’s impulses toward violence and oppression. Even if this goal is unachievable, Letov suggests, it is through rebellion, through resisting human nature and capitalism alike, that we find our humanity.

This idea finds its most profound expression in the Grazhdanskaia Oborona song “The State” (“Gosudarstvo”; 1988). The speaker first proclaims that he has killed the state in himself (“Ia ubil v sebe gosudarstvo”), then that his comrades, a collective “we,” have done the same (“My ubili v sebe gosudarstvo”). At a surface level, this appears to coincide with a typical definition of totalitarianism: having been indoctrinated into the dominant ideology, its opponents must rid themselves of its traces within themselves. Yet Letov’s own theory of metaphysical totalitarianism presents the intriguing possibility that the “state” represents not simply Soviet power but also reflects a universal human inclination towards violence and oppression. In killing the “state” in themselves, the song’s subjects are “doomed in advance to utter failure” (“zaraneobrechennye na polnyi proval”); human nature, the opponent in their existential struggle, is invincible. Yet even still, the song ends with an appeal to the listener, a resounding call to revolt: “KILL THE STATE IN YOURSELF!” (“UBEI V SEBE GOSUDARSTVO!”). Even if resistance itself is doomed, Letov seems to suggest, even if totalitarianism is all-encompassing and inevitable, rebelling against it – “killing the state in yourself” – is a battle worth fighting nonetheless.

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201 Ibid.
202 Ibid. Capitals present in the original.
In this chapter, we have problematized the traditional definition of totalitarianism through which we previously examined the musical output of Egor Letov in his “political” years leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before, the term totalitarianism provided us with an analytical framework through which the motifs of Letov’s “anti-Soviet” songs could be compared with the rhetoric of the generation of Soviet dissidents that preceded him – namely, that Letov, like the dissidents, frequently condemned “totalitarianism” and its ability to induce individuals to commit acts of violence in the name of the state that had robbed them of their autonomy. Letov, however, differed from the dissidents in that he not only condemned Soviet power but also renounced democratic reforms, which was the primary goal of the activists of the previous generation. By examining Letov’s own approach to political engagement through the lens of totalitarianism, we find that by using and manipulating the rhetoric of the Soviet dissidents, Letov is able to subvert traditional ideas of what it meant to be a rebel within the Soviet Union. Along with straightforward statements of hatred toward the government, Letov claims to carry out a metaphysical struggle, a rebellion against totalitarianism “embedded in the human consciousness.” We have seen how Letov conceived of totalitarianism less as a political term and more as a characteristic of human nature, an innate desire for violence and domination that, while it is not instilled by any particular government, is often expressed within one’s obedience to the state.

Accordingly, the fight against the government becomes a manifestation of a deeper existential battle. Letov applies this theory to his musical creativity, in which motifs of Soviet “totalitarianism” serve as “symbols” through which he relays this metaphysical struggle to his audience. Thus, Letov’s lyrical subjects resist not only the Soviet system but all governments, even as they acknowledge that human nature will doom them to oppressive rule. Such an
approach toward rebellion radically subverts preexisting conceptions of liberal Soviet-era resistance, which often contrast the “totalitarian” Soviet Union with the supposedly desirable democratic West. Letov, rather than continuing this dissident tradition, manipulates it in order to put forth his own theory – one that, despite its existentialist language, is inextricably intertwined with radical anticapitalist politics. When he declares “I will always be against” – “Ia vsegda budu protiv” – he does so both in opposition to the Soviet government and to the human condition as a whole. The defeat of one regime is not Letov’s only goal; instead, he finds meaning in the act of perpetual radical rebellion itself, the fight against any government – and indeed, in the absence of this struggle, Letov’s songs suggest that life holds little meaning at all.

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203 Letov, “Protiv.”
Conclusion

The term “totalitarianism” – perhaps one of the most damning epithets applied to the Soviet system of government by its opponents both within and outside the country – serves as an ideal lens through which to examine Egor Letov’s enigmatic politics as expressed in the songs of Grazhdanskaia Oborona. By examining the genealogy of the term from its formulation among Western anticommunist scholars to its incorporation into the rhetoric of the Soviet dissidents of the 1960s and 70s, we find that conceptualizing the Soviet Union as totalitarian allowed the dissidents not only to condemn the state’s seeming intention of stripping them of all liberty but also to appeal to the West on the grounds of human rights and liberal democratic values. Letov’s songs in Grazhdanskaia Oborona from 1987 to 1989 appear at first glance to reflect a similar tendency. Even when he does not explicitly use the term totalitarianism, the plight of his lyrical subject resembles that of the “antitotalitarian” Soviet dissident: an individual who has either been absorbed entirely into the collective and its pervasive ideology or is struggling fruitlessly against it. Letov’s work thus seems to reflect the idea prevalent among the dissidents that a totalitarian regime’s greatest affront is its ability to force its ideology upon the populace, eliminating human autonomy to the degree that individuals are reduced to marionettes of the state reflexively carrying out its destructive will. Yet a closer examination of Letov’s own statements on the role of politics in his work reveals that he conceived of totalitarianism as a condition of human nature rather than a novel type of government. Accordingly, his “antitotalitarian” struggle becomes at its foundation an existential one rather than a matter of straightforward anti-Sovietism. Unlike the protest of the dissidents, his political rebellion proclaims to have no achievable end goal. Instead, Letov asserts that political radicalism is an external manifestation of universal rebellion,
a rebellion that cannot be extinguished by regime changes or the overthrow of political and ideological systems, a rebellion that – however futile – will always remain worth fighting for.

Nevertheless, if we return to the problem posed in the introduction of this thesis regarding the erasure of politics in Letov’s work, we are confronted with a paradox. If we conclude that Letov defied the archetype of the liberal Soviet dissident by redefining totalitarianism according to existential standards, we ourselves run the risk of depoliticizing Grazhdanskaia Oborona, reducing Letov to an existential thinker rather than a radical representative of the Soviet Union’s most distinctive punk underground. From this, the question arises: if Letov conceives of his political fight as the reflection of a metaphysical antitotalitarian struggle, does he depoliticize his own work and become just as “liberal” as the dissidents? While I believe that it is impossible to place a definitive and uncomplicated political label on any period of Letov’s life, much less its entirety, I maintain that Letov’s intentional subversion of the dissident paradigm – one ultimately rooted in Western visions of individuality and democracy – constitutes a radical act in and of itself. To assume the mantle of the typical Soviet dissident only to manipulate it for different ends – both existential and anticapitalist – hardly seems a liberal maneuver. Instead, Letov offers a far more complicated picture of political rebellion and compels his listeners to reexamine their preconceptions of defiance in the Soviet Union – a reexamination that would be invaluable in Western academia as well.

Perhaps most importantly, we must not forget that politics for Letov was a crucial part of the existential struggle. If “metaphysical totalitarianism” manifested itself most clearly in the individual’s relationship to the state, and if a lifelong battle with this “totalitarianism of the human consciousness” was truly the only source of freedom, fulfillment, and joy, then there could be no rebellion without political defiance. Radical rebellion against systems of government
is not simply a facade, a mask to put on for show or shock value; it is an integral part of the existential battle, a vital component of being against. Furthermore, in his numerous political struggles – whether against the rapidly diminishing Soviet regime or against the onset of capitalism in the 1990s – Letov never turns toward the kind of conventional solutions that are idealized in the West. Democracy, even in the perestroika era, is never a panacea; “human rights” are never held sacred; bourgeois capitalism is always despised. Existential rebel or not, Letov’s work calls us to reconsider our preconceptions of political dissent both in the Soviet Union, present-day Russia, and the world as a whole. His radical refusal to be categorized among the pro-democratic activists whose rhetoric he manipulates offers an alternative vision of rebellion, a reminder that when looking in contemporary Russia for examples of defiance against Putin’s government, resistance does not always take on a democratic – or, just as crucially, capitalist – nature, even as these liberal forms of protest are upheld in the West. As Russia’s present government imposes control over its citizens’ ability to protest its abhorrent actions of war in Ukraine, reexamining resistance and redefining totalitarianism is more important than ever, and now seems a perfect time to recall Letov’s exhortation: “KILL THE STATE IN YOURSELF!”
Appendix: Texts and Translations of Selected Grazhdanskaia Oborona Songs

I have selected and translated the texts of the following four songs – “Totalitarianism” ("Totalitarizm"), “Great and Eternal” (“Zdorov' i vechno”), “Against” (“Protiv”), and “The State” (“Gosudarstvo”) – to provide context for the lyrics I have cited. The songs are listed in the order of their analysis in the thesis.

“Тоталитаризм”

Красный сигнал
Условный рефлекс
Тоталитаризм
Тоталитаризм
Собаки Павлова
исходят слюной

“Totalitarianism”

Red signal
Conditioned reflex
Totalitarianism
Totalitarianism
Pavlov’s dogs
salivate

Красное время
Тотальный синдром
Тоталитаризм
Тоталитаризм
Мы все выделяем
желудочный сок

Red time
Total syndrome
Totalitarianism
Totalitarianism
We all ooze
stomach acid

Красные дни
Тотальное время
Тоталитаризм
Тоталитаризм
Мы все одобряем
тотальный рефлекс

Red days
Total time
Totalitarianism
Totalitarianism
We all approve of
the total reflex

“Здорово и вечно”

“Great and Eternal”

Прожектор перестройки освещает

“Projector of Perestroika” illuminates
перестройку
Строитель коммунизма обожает коммунизм
Сотрудник КГБ одобряет КГБ
Любая правильная пуля любит свой пулемёт

Партия – ум, честь и совесть эпохи
Здорово и вечно!
Здорово и вечно!

В чугунных городах царит бетонная свобода
В отважных головах распоряжаются плакаты
Инерция заведует послушными телами
А нас нет, нас нет, нас нет, НАС НЕТ!

Партия – ум, честь и совесть эпохи
Здорово и вечно!
Здорово и вечно!

Щедро громыхнули государственные гимны
Тихо догорели нелитованные книжки
Грянули над миром триумфальные салюты
Щёлкнула под ногтем уничтоженная вошь

Партия – ум, честь и совесть эпохи
Здорово и вечно!
Здорово и вечно!

Обещает быть весна долгой
Ждёт отборного зерна пашня
И живём мы на земле доброй
Но нас нет, нас нет, нас нет, НАС НЕТ!

Партия – ум, честь и совесть эпохи

перестройка
The builder of communism adores communism
The KGB worker approves of the KGB
Any correct bullet loves its machine gun

The Party is the wisdom, honor, and conscience of the epoch
Great and eternal!

Concrete freedom reigns in cast-iron cities
Posters control valiant minds
Inertia operates obedient bodies
And we don’t exist, we don’t exist, we don’t exist, WE DON’T EXIST!

Great and eternal!

National anthems thundered bountifully
Banned books burned quietly
Triumphant salutes rang out over the world
The exterminated louse crunched under the fingernail

The Party is the wisdom, honor, and conscience of the epoch
Great and eternal!

The spring promises to be long
The fertile land awaits grain
And the earth we live on is kind
But we don’t exist, we don’t exist, we don’t exist, WE DON’T EXIST!

Great and eternal!
“Против”

Проваливаясь в ямы, чуя трупную вонь
Проблемы мирового гуманизма решать
В потёмках круг за кругом, коммунисты, вперёд!
Источник возражений запечатал Совдеп!

Я всегда буду против!

А кто не обломался, тем ещё предстоит
Патронами набейте непокорному грудь
Вникая изнурённо в просоветский пиздёж
В здоровом государстве будет здравый покой

Я всегда буду против!

Вожди сошлись на собственной единой цене
Почётные потомки гармоничных отцов
В потёмках круг за кругом прорывают глаза
Всегда выражая принуждённый восторг

Я всегда буду против!

“Государство”

Ржавый бункер — моя свобода
Сладкий пряник засох давно
Сапогом моего народа
Старшина тормозит говно

“Agast”

Falling into pits, smelling the corpselike reek
Solving the problems of world humanism
Round and round in the dark, communists, forward!
The source of opposition has been sealed by the Sovdep!

I will always be against!

And whoever hasn’t broken down yet will do so soon
Fill the defiant chest with bullets
Exhaustedly delve further into pro-Soviet bullshit
In a healthy state there will be healthy peace

I will always be against!

Leaders agreed on their own single price
Honored descendents of harmonious fathers
Round and round in the dark, eyes tear through
Wholeheartedly expressing forced delight

I will always be against!

“A rusted bunker is my freedom
Sweet gingerbread dried up long ago
With the jackboot of my people
The foreman slows down shit
Запряганный за уголом
Убитый помойным ведром
Добровольно ушедший в подвал
Заране обречённый на полнейший провал

Я убил в себе государство
Бессловесные в мире брании
Зрячие в мире пустых глазниц
Балансирующие на грани
Меж параллелью густых ресниц

Забытые за уголом
Немые помойным ведром
Задроченные в подвал
Заране обречённые на полный провал

Мы убили в себе государство
Ржавый бункер—твоя свобода
Заколочена дверь крестом
Полну яму врагов народа
Я укрою сухим листом

Я убил в себе государство
I killed the state in myself

Бессловесные в мире брании
The wordless in a world of profanity
Зрячие в мире пустых глазниц
The sighted in a world of empty eye sockets
Балансирующие на грани
The ones balanced on the border
Меж параллелью густых ресниц
Between the parallel of thick lashes

Забытые за уголом
Forgotten in the corner
Немые помойным ведром
Struck dumb by a garbage pail
Задроченные в подвал
 Fucking off to the basement
Заране обречённые на полный провал
Doomed in advance to total failure

Мы убили в себе государство
We killed the state in ourselves

Ржавый бункер—твоя свобода
A rusty bunker is your freedom
Заколочена дверь крестом
The door is boarded over with a cross
Полну яму врагов народа
A pit full of the enemies of the people –
Я укрою сухим листом
I’ll cover it with a dry leaf

Запряганный за уголом
Hidden behind the corner
Убитый помойным ведром
Killed by a garbage pail
Добровольно забытый в подвал
Willingly forgotten in the basement
Заране обречённый на полный провал
Doomed in advance to utter failure

УБЕЙ В СЕБЕ ГОСУДАРСТВО!
KILL THE STATE IN YOURSELF!

Убей.
Kill it.
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