

# THE INVENTION OF RUSSIA

The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom  
to Putin's War

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presidential term. The time for jokes and jokers was over. The events that were taking place in the country, including the arrest of Khodorkovsky, the destruction of the Yukos oil company and the occasional acts of terror, were too serious and complex to be described through the wordplay and sarcasm that Parfenov had turned into his house style. Parfenov admitted that much, but not until six years later, when he delivered an explosive speech which was filled with sincere civic pathos.

He spoke at an elegant black-tie ceremony, where he received an award set up in memory of Vladislav Listyev, an iconic Russian journalist and showman, who was murdered in 1995. Standing in front of Russia's powerful TV executives, Parfenov told them what he thought about the state of their industry. 'Our television is getting more sophisticated at exciting, enticing, entertaining and making [the audience] laugh, but it can hardly be called a civic or public political institution.' For a reporter on Russian state television, said a visibly nervous Parfenov, 'top bureaucrats are not newsmakers, but his boss's bosses'. This means that 'journalists are not journalists at all but bureaucrats, following the logic of service and submission'.<sup>34</sup>

In the past, Parfenov would have cringed at words such as 'civic institution'. Now, he was delivering them with dead seriousness. The TV executives who had turned Russia's state television channels into a mixture of entertainment and propaganda looked at Mr Parfenov with deadpan expressions on their faces. Among them were Dobrodeev, Parfenov's long-time colleague at NTV, and Konstantin Ernst, his old-time friend and co-producer of *Old Songs about Important Things*, who was now in charge of Russia's Channel One.

## The Survivor

Ernst was no Soviet apparatchik. With his long, flowing hair, he was a Hollywood-crazy television journalist and producer who had stayed the course and arrived at the top, presiding over the country's main national television channels that broadcast to its eleven time zones. Born in 1961, he was among the brightest and most ambitious members of the generation that was created both by the Soviet Union and by the reaction against it, who most despised the restrictions of that period and who benefited most from their removal. He was a blue-blood of the Soviet intellectual establishment; his father was a professor of biology and Ernst himself had a doctorate in biochemistry. His real passion was cinema, though, and like many talented and energetic people of his generation he was drawn to television. He started with the *Vzglyad* programme, which was at

the forefront of Perestroika television, but soon launched his own programme called *Matador*.

The show had nothing to do with bullfighting: Ernst simply liked the sound of the word. He took his viewers into the world of Hollywood studios, film stars and the Cannes film festival. Its format was similar to Parfenov's early, non-political *Namedni*. As Ernst said at the twentieth anniversary of *Namedni*, both *Matador* and *Namedni* tried to articulate a time that had not yet arrived. 'We wanted this time [to look like our programmes] and to be ahead of it,' he said.<sup>35</sup>

In one memorable episode of *Matador*, Ernst told the story of the creation of Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*. Dressed in an US Air Force uniform for effect, Ernst seemed intoxicated by the energy of the scene where US helicopters bomb the Vietcong to the soundtrack of Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries'. Francis Ford Coppola seemed a natural role model for the young Ernst.

In 1995, Berezovsky singled Ernst out for his determination and ambition, appointing him general producer of Channel One which went under the name of Ostankino or Public Russian Television (ORT) at the time. Ernst was not so much an ideologist, but an *organizer* and a *producer* of the channel. Entrusted with the largest channel in terms of its reach, he produced not just news and popular shows, but common experiences for the country. They were invariably sleek and watchable. Ernst's first big hit as a producer was *Old Songs about Important Things* which seamlessly connected the Soviet past and Russia's present.

Four years later, in September 1999 just as Putin was being promoted as Yeltsin's successor, Ernst was appointed the head of Channel One. Under Ernst, the word 'One' referred not so much to the number of the television broadcasting frequency, but its position in the ratings and influence. While Putin restored the Soviet anthem as the country's 'most important song', Ernst restored *Vremya* with its familiar Soviet-era tune as the most important prime-time news programme which articulated the country's narrative. What he was most interested in, though, was not news, but fiction. In the late 1990s and early 2000s Ernst and Channel One became one of the biggest producers of film and TV serials.

As Lenin said, 'of all the kinds of arts the most important for us is cinema'. Images could get through to people's consciousness in a way that words could not. They could also sell in a way that words could not. The ability of a film to influence the minds of the audience in Russia was far greater than in America, simply because there was less noise in the marketplace. Ernst did not set out to sell an ideology – he did not really have one – but he used ideology to sell the

films he produced.

After the 1998 devaluation of the rouble, import substitution became one of the main factors behind Russian economic growth. It was also the main factor behind the growth of the Russian film industry. In the same way as people swapped imported goods for domestic equivalents they substituted locally produced dramas for American soap operas. ‘Russia’ became a brand.

Few people sensed the demand for patriotism as acutely – and supplied it as profitably – as did Ernst. He used Russian patriotic slogans, in addition to the weight and resources of the state-controlled television channel, to promote films which were modelled on Hollywood blockbusters. In 2004 Ernst produced the most successful post-Soviet blockbuster called *Nochnoi Dozor* (*Night Watch*), a special effects-filled fantasy-thriller. Ernst sold the distribution rights for the film to 20th Century Fox and in the first four weeks the film collected more than \$16 million, breaking box office records and in Russia even putting it ahead of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.

Based on a fantasy novel by Sergei Lukyanov, *Night Watch* was the Russian answer to *The Matrix*. It is set in contemporary Moscow where ordinary people have parallel other-worldly existences as vampires, shamans and witches. They are divided into ‘light ones’ and ‘dark ones’ and have been fighting with each other since life began.

The ‘light’ ones in the film are closely connected to their Soviet past, whereas the ‘dark’ ones clearly belong to the world of Russian capitalism. The two sides are fighting for the soul of a twelve-year-old boy – ‘the great other’ – who in the end chooses the dark. As the boy tells his estranged father, who is one of the ‘light ones’: ‘You are no better than the dark. You are even worse. You lie and only pretend to be good.’

In his interviews Ernst explained that the ‘dark’ ones, for all their aggression, do not equal evil and the ‘light’ do not equal good. ‘The “dark” are much freer, they let themselves be as they want to be. The “light” are more frustrated, they have too many duties, and feel responsible for a lot of people. The “dark” have eschewed constraints, they live for themselves, while the light look like neurotics who are trying to be good to everyone.’<sup>36</sup> Ernst identified himself with the dark ones.

He threw in the entire resources of Channel One, including its news programmes, to promote the film, which ensured its commercial success. The makers tried to load the film with extra meaning, which soon evaporated, but the precedent of a Hollywood-scale Russian blockbuster stayed. In an interview that Ernst gave after the film, he lamented the inability of Russians to live in the

present moment. ‘Our people live either in the past or in the future,’ he said.<sup>37</sup> Ernst, who descended from an old German family that had settled in Russia, lived in the present and shaped it.

Ernst did not suffer from cognitive dissonance. News and fiction were not two separate parts of his life but harmoniously complemented and interacted with one another. *Night Watch* featured a scene from Channel One’s nine o’clock news programme *Vremya* with a cameo appearance by one of its smooth-talking presenters who informs his audience about an approaching cataclysm.

*Vremya* was an antidote to chaos and disorder – a source of stability and routine, a matrix. Every programme followed the same repeated pattern – like a lullaby – starting with Putin travelling around the country or receiving ministers in his office, followed by examples of Russian resurgence and ending with (bad) news from abroad. Unlike any other programme on the channel, *Vremya* was (and still is) broadcast uninterrupted by commercials.

Strictly speaking, *Vremya* did not report news. Instead, it created a virtual reality according to the hierarchy of the state with Putin at the top. As a state news programme, *Vremya* did not allow itself any scorn, irony or ridicule. The tone of the presenter was always stern and serious. Its aim was to assure viewers that they could sleep peacefully in the knowledge that the country was being governed and guarded by a wise and caring president who would make the right decisions; that criminals and terrorists would be punished and champions of labour rewarded. ‘Any stabilization makes news calmer. If news works like a constant nerve irritant – as it did in Russia in the 1990s – it is a sign of instability rather than of the freedom of speech,’ Ernst explained.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, TV news did not reflect the country’s stabilization – it emanated an illusion of stability just as the violent crime dramas that flooded Russian television created an illusion of total lawlessness. Both news and soap operas were artefacts and they worked together to create a balance between dark and light as the plot of *Night Watch* would have it. While news was supposed to calm the audience, the violent crime dramas raised the level of adrenaline and aggression in the national bloodstream. As one high-powered Russian official and former FSB general explained, this deluge of graphic violence was not a response to high spectator demand, but a conscious policy formed in the high echelons of the Russian power structure, to create the impression that only the strong state portrayed in the news could protect the vulnerable population from the violence on the screen.

The question of what was good or bad for the audience was not decided by its tastes. ‘A doctor does not ask the patient under the knife what is good for him,’

Ernst said.<sup>39</sup> It was his and Dobrodeev's job to prescribe and administer the medicine.

## The Battle Between Light and Darkness

*Night Watch* was released in Russia in early July 2004. A few weeks later, on 1 September, real horror struck the country – a school in Beslan in North Ossetia, with over 1,000 children, was taken hostage by Chechen terrorists. It was the worst terrorist attack in Russia's history, more cruel and deadly than any other. Throughout the crisis the Russian media reported official figures fed by the Kremlin which put the number of hostages at 354. This was almost certainly a deliberate falsehood that infuriated the terrorists so much that they started to deny the children water and barred them from going to the toilet, forcing them to drink their own urine. According to one surviving hostage, the terrorists were listening to the news on radios. When they heard the number, one of them said: 'Russia says there are only 300 of you here. Maybe we should kill enough of you to get down to that number.'<sup>40</sup>

After two days and three nights of negotiations, when independent Russian journalists and activists, including the courageous Anna Politkovskaya,<sup>†</sup> who commanded respect among Chechen fighters, were prevented from helping with negotiations, the security services began to storm the building.

On 3 September, at 1.03 p.m., two explosions were heard from the school's gym where most of the hostages were being kept. As it later turned out, the explosions were caused by a thermobaric grenade fired by the Russian special forces. The terrorists started shooting the children, mayhem broke out and fighting began. Foreign networks such as CNN and the BBC broadcast the events live. In Russia, on the two state-controlled TV channels, normal programming continued. An hour later, they switched to what by then was turning into a massacre, but their coverage was confusing and brief. Channel One spent ten minutes on Beslan before returning to a Brazilian soap opera called *Women in Love*. Echo Moskvy, the city's liberal radio station, kept its viewers up to date by watching events unfold on CNN.

Throughout the day, both state channels featured news bulletins on the hour, repeatedly reporting the official line: the authorities did not plan to storm the school; the terrorists had started the shooting; the siege was the work of an international terrorist organization whose numbers included ethnic Arabs and even an African (he later turned out to be Chechen).

Several hours into the clash, Russia Channel gave the impression that the

fighting was over and that most of the hostages were now safe. Viewers saw children being carried by their parents and heard a relieved voice behind the camera saying: ‘They are alive, it is OK, they are alive, alive.’ As some were reunited with their parents, a correspondent commented: ‘There are tears here again, but this time these are tears of joy.’ A presenter gave figures of those taken to hospital, but carefully avoided giving estimates of the number of people killed. ‘According to the latest information,’ he said, ‘the fighting in the school is over. There are no dead or wounded there... we can’t give more exact figures of the injured... er... the precise figure of how many hostages were freed.’<sup>41</sup>

Then, at about 9 p.m., after more than 300 children and parents had died, and as the gunfight between the hostage-takers and special forces was still going on, viewers were treated to extraordinary programming. Russia Channel showed brave Russian soldiers fighting bearded Chechen bandits who were hiding in caves and shouting ‘Allahu Akbar!’ These were scenes from the military drama *On My Honour!* Channel One meanwhile showed *Die Hard*, a film in which Bruce Willis saves hostages in a New York high-rise. The actors on the screen seemed to be taking fictional revenge on behalf of those who in Beslan were still dying.

Dobrodeev and Ernst were the demiurges who created myths and explained reality. As Ernst said afterwards: ‘Our task number two is to inform the country about what is going on. Today, the main task of the television is to mobilize the country. Russia needs consolidation.’<sup>42</sup> Unlike Soviet television, which was closely guarded by censors, Ernst mostly made his own decisions. ‘Nobody calls me and orders me to do anything,’ he insisted.<sup>43</sup> This was probably true. But even if it were not, he did not slavishly take instructions from the Kremlin, but willingly put his talent and imagination at its service.

‘I am a statist, a liberal statist,’ said Ernst a decade later.<sup>44</sup> Throughout his years as the head of Channel One he has put his energy into consolidating the nation around spectacular television projects and creating common experiences based on a narrative of the state, removing any need for doubt, reflection or repentance. Unlike Dobrodeev, who turned into a political apparatchik and the master of the Kremlin’s propaganda, Ernst considers himself an artist, a creator, or, to use television language, a producer of the country.

Like any good producer, he unmistakably sensed the demands of his audience and in the 2000s the country craved a show of resurgence. People whose incomes kept going up because of the increase in the price of oil, rather than because they had to work harder, had plenty of free time for entertainment and demanded a display of Russia’s greatness to explain and supplement their

improving fortunes. In the mid-2000s, this demand was largely satisfied through sport, entertainment and parades.

In June 2008 the Russian football team won a quarter-final against the Netherlands in the European championship. Nearly 80 per cent of the country watched the match – a record rating in Russian television history. At night, Moscow erupted into a mass patriotic frenzy with cars hooting, flags waving and bikers parading – the same ones who would a few years later wave Russian flags in Crimea. At first glance, it seemed a copy of European football events, but while in Europe sport has long turned into a substitute for war, in Russia it was only a starter.

The victory was number one news on Russian television. Popular talk shows could not get enough of sport. ‘Russia – forward!’ became a national slogan. The celebration of victory coincided with an escalation of a propaganda campaign against Georgia which was portrayed as America’s proxy. A few weeks later Russian tanks and aeroplanes invaded Georgia. It was Russia’s first fully televised war, scripted as a copy of NATO’s action in Kosovo, and it produced a similar reaction to the one after the football match.

This was the ultimate show of Russia’s resurgence. Television channels were part of the military operation, waging an essential propaganda campaign, spreading disinformation and demonizing the country Russia was about to attack. The war started on 7 August 2008 – the day of the opening of the Summer Olympics in Beijing – with Georgian forces responding to fire coming from the Russian-backed breakaway region of South Ossetia with heavy artillery. According to the Russian propaganda, Georgia was a reckless and dangerous aggressor and Russia had an obligation, as a peacekeeper, to protect the victims. Russian television talked about genocide, 2,000 civilian deaths and tens of thousands of refugees. (The real figure of South Ossetians killed in the conflict was 133.)

Putin, in a light sports jacket, talking to South Ossetian women, performed the role of superman in a special effects drama staged by Ernst and Dobrodeev. He flew to the Russian side of the Caucasus mountain range straight from Beijing to hear hair-raising stories from refugees:

*First woman:* They burnt our girls when they were still alive.

*Putin (surprised):* Alive?

*First woman:* Yes, young girls! They herded them like cattle into a house and burnt them...

*Second woman:* They stabbed a baby, he was one and a half. They stabbed him in a cellar.

*Putin:* I cannot even listen to this.

*Second woman:* An old woman with two little kids – they were running and a tank drove over them.

*Putin:* They must be crazy. This is plain genocide...

The rumours spread by Russian television – of Georgian troops targeting women and children and performing genocide – later proved to be untrue, but at the time they inspired ethnic cleansing of Georgian villages by South Ossetian irregulars. The main target for attack by Russian television, however, was not Georgia – which was an obvious enemy – but Russia's own audience which was bombarded with anti-American propaganda.

Judging by the picture, Russia was fighting not against a tiny, poor country that used to be its vassal, but against a dangerous and powerful aggressor backed by the imperialist West. One Russian Duma deputy reflected the mood in a television interview: ‘Today, it is quite obvious who the parties in the conflict are. They are the US, the UK, Israel who participated in training the Georgian army, Ukraine who supplied it with weapons. We are facing a situation where there is NATO aggression against us.’<sup>45</sup>

In the following few years, as America proposed the so-called ‘reset’ – a form of détente policy – and Dmitry Medvedev, who acted as Russian president, talked about modernization under the slogan ‘Russia – Forward!’, patriotic urges were satisfied by military parades and song contests. On 9 May 2009, fresh from watching the annual Second World War victory day parade, Putin went to inspect the readiness of the Eurovision Song Contest that was staged by Ernst and opened three days later. The two events occupied equally important places in Putin’s schedule and in the Kremlin’s narrative of resurgence. As Ernst said at the time, it was the ‘external political effect’ that mattered. The main ‘geopolitical show’ of Ernst’s television career was still to come.

Ernst was entrusted with staging one of the crowning moments of Vladimir Putin’s rule – the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics – a project that Putin cared about deeply and which was supposed to legitimize his return to power as Russia’s president in 2012. No expenses were spared for the Olympics – \$50 billion was thrown at the project. A special arena was built for the opening and closing ceremonies; the world’s top technicians, designers, architects, riggers and musicians worked around the clock. The result was the most grandiose pageantry Russia had ever seen, a staggering display of the country’s comeback, staged with panache, style and imagination.

Ernst called the show *Dreams about Russia*. The ‘dreams’ defied the forces of gravitation as the show unfolded both on stage and in the air – the heavy sets were suspended and moved along rail tracks attached to the roof of the stadium. The sky was no limit. Seven islands – each representing a piece of the country – drifted through the air like clouds, accompanied by a song from the opera *Prince Igor* about a promised land of the free where ‘the sun shines so brightly’, where ‘roses bloom luxuriously’ and where ‘nightingales sing in the green forests and

sweet grapes grow'. It was a captivating and grandiose utopia.

At the centre of the show's narrative was a history of the empire and the state – not of its people. Rather than celebrating the diversity of the country's population, as the Olympic rules prescribe, it celebrated unity under the state flag. A troika of horses made of white light floated through the sky; the colourful domes of St Basil's Church (balloons filled with hot air) bounced joyfully along with jesters and acrobats in a medieval fayre; subtle engravings of Peter the Great's construction of St Petersburg morphed into a choreographed display of the Russian imperial army; a captivating ball scene from *War and Peace* gave way to a constructivist study of the Bolshevik Revolution drowned in red light. A steam engine, suspended in mid-air, pulled along the wheels and clogs of Stalin's industrialization. The scene was set to a tune called 'Vremya Vpered' ('Time, Forward!') which has long been used as the theme tune of the *Vremya* television programme. Time moved seamlessly on to the optimistic and humane 1960s filled with humour and nostalgia – as though inspired by Ernst's and Parfenov's project *Old Songs about Important Things*.

Ernst exceeded himself. No country had ever staged such a technically complex show in the air. He watched the opening in the command centre. At the sound of the final firework, Ernst jumped from his seat, shouting in English 'We've done it!' The country that Ernst had conjured up on the stage was not a place of Russian dolls and Cossack dances, but one of avant-garde artists, great ballet, Tolstoy, Nabokov and Gogol; a sophisticated European country proud of its culture and its history: 'the country I want to live in,' tweeted Ksenia Sobchak, a

'I wanted to create a matrix that would indirectly affect the whole country,' said Ernst.<sup>46</sup> This was the invention of Russia. It had the same mythological function as Stalin's 1930s Exhibition of People's Achievements (VDNKh) that served as a matrix of Soviet life. The exhibition, which turned into a permanent display of Soviet achievements, presented a model of a cornucopia and fertility in a country where farmers had been eliminated as a class. Live bulls were paraded on the site, supposedly to inseminate growth. It was no accident that a year after the Olympics opening ceremony, its sets were displayed at VDNKh.

Receiving the Man of the Year award in 2014 from the Russian edition of *GQ*, a men's fashion and style magazine, Ernst said that his opening of the Olympics was the happiest and scariest moment of his life. 'I got a chance to confess my love to the country in front of three billion people on earth and what is probably even more important, for two hours to bring my compatriots together in one emotion, even though many of them cannot be brought together in one

emotion...’<sup>47</sup> The question is what kind of emotion.

For all its technological modernity and scenes of the avant-garde, Russia’s present was its past. There was no sign of Perestroika or the 1990s or the 2000s. It was as though the Soviet Union never collapsed. Ernst effectively stopped the story of the country in the early 1960s, the time of Krushchev’s Thaw and when Ernst was born. ‘The time after the war is the time we live in,’ Channel One commentators told their television audience.

As Grigory Revzin, an architecture critic and columnist, noted, the choice of Krushchev’s Thaw as the last ‘historic’ period reflected the spirit of the time when the ceremony was conceived – in the short period of Dmitry Medvedev’s presidential rule, which was perceived as a brief ‘thaw’ and which proposed ‘modernization’ as its main goal. Yet when the show opened the times had changed and its optimistic mood clashed with the tone of a military-style mobilization created by Ernst’s television news. Channel One rebranded itself as ‘First Olympic’, and dressed its presenters in the Russian team’s uniform. Any critic of the Olympics who dared to mention corruption during its construction was deemed an enemy. Every Russian medal was celebrated as though it was a military victory.

Parallel with the show in Sochi, another far more dramatic but no less colourful show was unfolding in Kiev. Thousands of people on Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) rose against a kleptocratic, dysfunctional and authoritarian post-Soviet order that was personified in Ukraine by the thuggish, corrupt president Viktor Yanukovych. People waved EU flags as a symbol of the dignified life they wished to have. Riot police tried to disband protesters who set up a camp in the square after Yanukovych dumped an agreement with the EU under pressure from Russia.

At night, faced with the very real prospect of being beaten up or killed, the people in Maidan came together in one emotion. On the illuminated stage, projected on a screen, protest leaders called for calm and defiance, priests read out prayers and Ruslana, a popular Ukrainian singer and the winner of the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest, led the national anthem: ‘Ukraine has not yet perished, nor her glory, nor her freedom.’ Thousands of Maidan protesters struck up the chorus line: ‘Souls and bodies we’ll lay down, all for our freedom.’ It looked like the birth of the nation.

By the time the Sochi Olympics had finished, blood had been spilled in Kiev. Riot police stormed Maidan. Officers threw percussion grenades taped up with nails and bolts at protesters, who responded with Molotov cocktails. Snipers shot protesters with live ammunition. The centre of Kiev went up in flames and Yanukovych flew to Sochi to consult Putin. The picture of Kiev’s inferno spoilt

Putin's spectacle in Sochi. He was furious. The revolution in Kiev, he was convinced, was staged by the West which wanted to undermine him and turn Ukraine away from his sphere of influence. 'The Olympics', Ernst said, 'goes well beyond sport. It is geopolitics. We staged a good Olympics and it produced a strong counter-reaction. One day we will turn up all kinds of documents and write a true history of 2014.'<sup>48</sup>

Three days after the closing ceremony of the Sochi Olympics – also staged by Ernst – Russian 'polite green men' in unmarked military uniforms staged a coup in Crimea. Russian naval vessels that guarded the coast around Sochi set course towards Sebastopol. The Kremlin began the annexation of Crimea and stirred a war in the east of Ukraine. Television was at the forefront of that attack and Ernst and Dobrodeev were commanding the information forces. It was a television show whose cost was no longer calculated in billions of dollars but in thousands of lives.

\* Soon after being appointed prime minister, Putin half-jokingly told an assembly of intelligence officers on the anniversary of the foundation of the Soviet secret police: 'The intelligence operatives planted inside the Russian government have successfully completed the first stage of the operation.'

\*\* Yegor was also one of NTV's trustees, as were Alexander Yakovlev and Mikhail Gorbachev.

† Politkovskaya was poisoned with mysterious toxins while on a plane as she flew to Beslen to negotiate with hostage-takers. Two years later, on 7 October 2007, she was killed outside her Moscow apartment.