


**COLLECTIVISM**  
 **AFTER**  
**MODERNISM**

*The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*

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## 9. Beyond Representation and Affiliation: Collective Action in Post-Soviet Russia

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When "a thinking political subject" looks around today, twenty years after the official end of the cold war and a few years since the beginning of the war on terrorism, two basic questions once resorted to by the Russian intelligentsia come to mind: "Who is to be blamed?" and "What is to be done?" But these questions sound rather old-fashioned to our ear now and, really, they are from the nineteenth century. Consistent with the mood of today they may more accurately be reframed as "Who cares?" It seems as if now we have never been further away from the old ideal of collective action and collective responsibility, and every attempt to organize such actions seems counterproductive. This essay will survey the decade of the 1990s in post-Soviet Russia, focusing specifically on two politically marginal efforts to go against the grain of political apathy: the art movement known today as Moscow Actionism (Moscovcky Akzionism), presented here through the works and ideas of the artist, theorist, and curator Anatoly Osmolovsky, and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM, Komitet Soldatskikh Materei), today properly called Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (UCSMR). My main focus will be to raise some general questions about the efficacy and ethics of political action within the larger crises of political apathy and political representation in post-Soviet Russia. Toward this end, the awareness and treatment of heterogeneity in pursuing such actions and the role of experimentation, using various theories of "the political," will be critically evaluated. I will argue that what I call "maternal politics" embodies a different notion of the political subject that in turn opens up new ways of thinking about political action in relation to recent experiences in post-Soviet Russia.



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THE EGEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICAL APATHY  
IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

The initial years of perestroika (1986–91) were a very exciting period as a real opportunity opened up for self-reflection and redefinition of Russian national identity, particularly in relation to its own violent past. However, reflexivity and critique were soon silenced by demands to not “dig too deep”—not be too critical—and the promise of redefinition turned instead to be a mandate for reconciliation with the (largely Orthodox religious) past and a return to “true Russian roots and traditions,” albeit often as a modern political or artistic strategy.<sup>1</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church became arguably the single most influential social force of the 1990s, uniting political and cultural leaders in adopting a collective amnesia.

In the context of these changes, Russian intellectuals and artists were overwhelmed, and not only by the problems of everyday life. After seventy years of physical and intellectual isolation, it became clear that large portions of so-called contemporary thought, art, and action were not part of Soviet discourse, training, or life. The international political and artistic legacy of the 1960s, for example, was to play a limited role. This was a very difficult situation for cultural workers—artists, writers, intellectuals, academics, students—who had long yearned to engage with that broader cultural climate. At the same time, tourists as well as specialists in the Russian and Soviet past came to visit the hollow spectacle of post-Soviet society and often to take away souvenirs of the Soviet past. Much of the cultural exchange that took place during this period—in art, academic circles, or civil society—(with notable exceptions, of course) was experienced as dissatisfying. There are numerous and different reasons for this—one day someone should write on this subject—but here I will only point out that such contacts often resulted in profound misunderstandings, not only in terms of reference (linguistic or otherwise) but also in emotions and intentions. We Russians were often asked to confirm existing “truths” on the issues of Marxism, gender, politics, democracy, Russian character, etc., in ways that seemed to miss the point from the beginning. Reaction followed on our part—the only reaction that seemed available: “defending our way of life,” even though it was not clear what that had come to mean. In this respect, the 1990s could well be called a “defensive decade” in Russian intellectual and artistic history as Russians were asked to confirm whatever their new friends thought had happened to us under Soviet rule with the visitors often assuming a higher ground with more advanced approaches and methods in both art and thought. Even when the situation was more complex than this, the feeling of inadequacy and lack of ability to respond led to a feeling of closure and voicelessness.<sup>2</sup>

This defensiveness, in many cases coupled with the larger refusal to address Russia's past, led to a situation when many Russian artists and intellectuals turned to themselves as subjects of their study—certainly not something unheard of in the history of art or ideas. Their own personal grievances and feelings were often expressed as symptoms of Soviet and post-Soviet life, and something that “the West” would not be able to understand fully. Of course, such works can be successful both aesthetically and commercially, but they may well be based on an “egological” foundation. In other words, such works can be protective of a self that feels threatened from encountering something or someone foreign, and we should be careful not to naturalize and hence neutralize this question and instead look to their social and political genealogy.

#### MOSCOW ACTIONISM AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION

Arguably, Moscow Actionism as represented by its conceptual formulator, Anatoly Osmolovsky, was the only art movement in post-Soviet Russia that articulated itself as derivative from “the left”—be it Marx, Lenin, and Russian and Soviet history, contemporary antiglobalization theorists, the Frankfurt School, or “1968” French intellectuals. It is interesting that this leftism created a certain agenda that made the connection between art and politics seemingly natural with art being positioned as activism, as direct public action. The other two well-known representatives of Moscow Actionism—Alexander Brenner and Oleg Kulik—were different in this respect. Their strategy was also direct public action in line with the social and economic chaos of the 1990s but without Marxist or leftist underpinnings. Alexander Brenner's actions included drawing a green dollar sign on Malevich's painting *White Cross on White* in Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and walking into the Kremlin to claim state power from Yeltsin. Oleg Kulik is most known for his performance *A Mad Dog or the Last Taboo Guarded by a Lonely Cerberus*, with A. Brenner (Guelman Gallery, November 23, 1994, Moscow), subsequently repeated in other cities, in which a naked Kulik barked and threw himself on passersby. Such gestures are usually explained as corresponding to the “chaos of the 1990s” and according to various theories of transgression and abjection. For our purposes here we will focus on one political action and movement: *Nongovernmental Control Commission* (*Vnepravitel'stvennaya Kontrol'naya Komissiya*), 1996–2001, organized by Osmolovsky together with several other Moscow artists, theorists, and activists including A. Ter-Oganyan, O. Kireev, D. Pimenov, I. Chubarov, D. Gutov, and others.

At various points in his writings, Anatoly Osmolovsky has tried to address this crisis of representation without throwing out the idea of politically engaged art altogether. For him, "the absence of true knowledge of the world, the collapse of homogenous social structures and subcultures, and the impossibility of developing a logical behavior inevitably make us deny one of the main political principles of social governance—the principle of representation." He continues thus in his influential 1998 article:

The whole democratic parliamentary and party system is based on the principle of representation. Their profession is to express our opinion! But isn't it the main goal of a modern leftist to create the social conditions through which each would have his own opinion and thus would be free from the totalizing state machine? Maybe Lenin's famous catchphrase "Every kitchen-maid will be able to rule a country" was the establishment of every ordinary member of society having his own personal opinion within Communism? Moreover, this very presence of personal opinion can be the warranty and the *carte blanche* for any pretension to any kind of governance.

Don't be afraid of insane ideas—they are never clinically insane! Singularity and the intensive "drive" of thinking is the sign of modern competence! Did anyone think why Zhirinovskiy won the 1994 election (and in 1996 proved that his success was not an accident)? Only due to that competency!<sup>3</sup>

Such reflexivity and vigilance to not speak for others is something that was, and still remains, an ill-articulated issue in Russian contemporary art, and it is often disguised as a response to Western superficial political correctness. According to many hasty critics, such singularity disables politics—it puts the artist in a situation of silence and impotence, with no basis for action or its justification. "And what are we to do now," such critics ask, "nothing?" Even though we might disagree with Osmolovsky's transfer of the question of representation from politicians to artists, his insistence that reflexivity is the most important question for politically engaged art had a unique vitality in an era of apathy.

The main action the group is known for and that made their work significantly distinct is one that is directly connected to the Russian elections and leftist thought—the *Against All Parties Campaign*, a project that included street actions, publications, and exhibitions. The *Against All Parties Campaign* work exploited the typical election process. In addition to the actual standing political candidates and party affiliations, the Russian ballot has one further line that reads "Against All Parties, Groups, and Candidates." As such, if a voting person strongly feels that none of the candidates satisfy his or her demands in elections, he or she can express this by choosing the vote option "Against All." Osmolovsky's project made a political campaign advocating for this particular option. Additionally, according to the current Russian election law, if other candidates or parties receive less votes than the "Against All" candidate (as they term such a ballot option

in Russia, personalizing it—*kandidat protiv vseh*), or this candidate takes more than 50 percent of the votes, the elections are annulled, and the other candidates or parties cannot stand in the same election again.

In the 1990s Russian voters at first did not broadly exercise this option against all. Those who were unhappy with other choices could simply destroy their ballot or not vote at all. In such cases the electoral process was not influenced very much. Candidates would generally prefer voters not to come to elections, rather than choosing the "Against All" option that provided a further statement of disapproval (and, of course, we know that apathy and bad turnout can be exploited, sometimes by ultraright or extremist candidates to win an election). However, as the number of votes cast in favor of "Against All" increased over the course of the 1990s, indicating people's desire to show their strong disapproval of the representational failures of the elections by voting against all, this became an increasingly self-conscious expression of public opinion. In one way or another, action "Against All" drew attention to this option too. There are no statistical data to assess how instrumental artists were in raising popularity of the "Against All" option, but we can assume that the street actions that you can see in Figure 9.2, held in the center of Moscow, had an impact. They were mentioned in the press, as well as noticed by FSB (home security agency), which later questioned some of the participating artists. Today this option is so popular across the country that election authorities are seriously considering the removal of the "Against All" box from future ballots.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the 1990s it became clear that the Russian artistic and larger intellectual environment was not compatible with issues of responsibility, representation, or political experimentation. With the lack of networking with so-called ordinary people, modern politically engaged artists such as Osmolovsky seemed to be "terribly far removed from the people" (Lenin's expression) as well as from the existing mood of the art world where the "Who cares?" question persists more often than the revolutionary question of "What is to be done?" When the social situation in Moscow changed, Osmolovsky changed his strategy too; a more recent exhibition he curated was titled "Art without Justifications" (*Iskusstvo bez opravdaniia*). In the curatorial essay he writes, "After multiple and rather painful clashes with the repressive state apparatuses and private social organizations, art had to admit that there are limitations to its actions. Understanding of its own *social* limits unavoidably leads to a search of *aesthetic* ones. . . . Tensed efforts of art to become politically important in a society, its desire to be able to influence society politically in an immediate way, are mostly pitiful and laughable. Here art is an obstacle to itself. It is impossible to be both artistically and politically effective."<sup>5</sup>

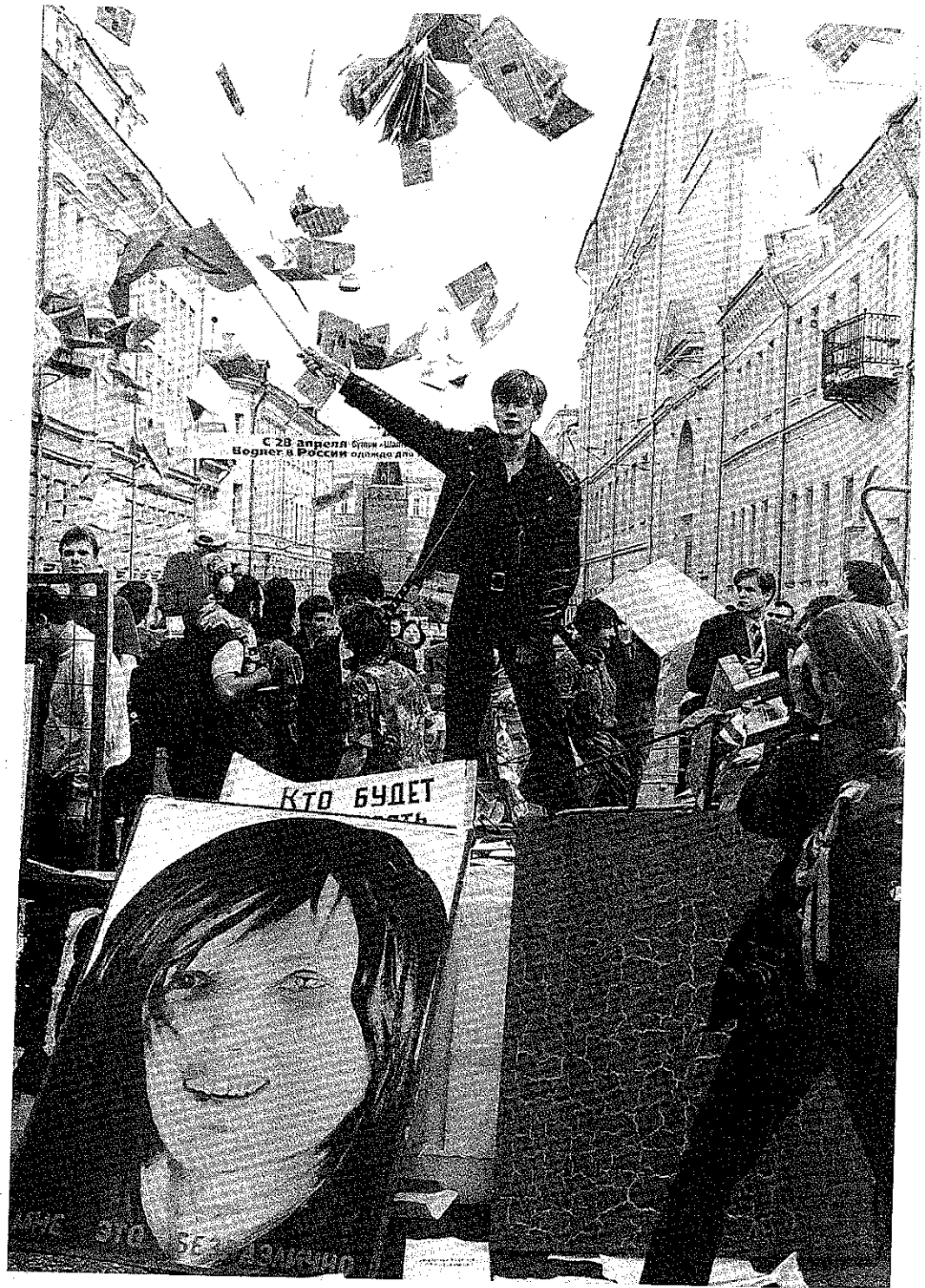


FIGURE 9.2. A. Osmolovsky (concept), *The Barricade: Devoted to the Events in Paris of 1968*, action held on Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street, Moscow, May 23, 1998. Copyright A. Osmolovsky, 2004. Printed with permission.



Osmolovsky was arguably the most politically engaged artist of the 1990s in Russia, not only as an artist-activist but, more important, in terms of his artistic innovations and constant search for the place of art in a changing society. In relation to our larger question of political engagement, its ethics, strategies, responsibility, and social relevance, his position seems to have become more and more general and metatheoretical. In his most recent views, cited above, about art and politics where he generalizes the artists' experience into art itself, the art-into-life ambitions of the 1990s seem to have been displaced by the certainly important, but by no means oppositional, question of aesthetics. The situation in the 1990s in Moscow was very specific, and at the time not many were interested in the question of politically engaged art to start with. As I tried to show in an earlier section, politics was credited with "everything bad" that happened to art under Soviet rule or for formalist misunderstanding of the 1920s avant-garde. With the lack of support from the Russian art world, as well as increasing state control of public life, Osmolovsky and other members of the group had to move on, so to speak. And they did. Or did they have to? In the next part of this essay I will try to outline the main problem of politics based on affiliation vis-à-vis representation followed by an introduction to a different kind of politics that forgoes both affiliation and representation as models of political action, practiced by the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia.

#### BETWEEN AFFILIATION AND REPRESENTATION

Traditionally the notion of the state has been defined through its opposition to civil society. Foucault, among others, has shown that this opposition is no longer useful for carrying out effective political struggle: the moment of the "state no more than in any other moment of its history, does not have such unity, individuality, strong functionality, and, frankly speaking, importance; at the end, the state may be nothing more than an imagined reality, mystified abstraction, which importance is much more limited than many of us think."<sup>6</sup> His notion of "governmentality" serves as an alternative to state in the analysis of the political sphere. And indeed, governmentalization of the state is probably more significant today than what Foucault calls "state-ization" of society. Another related point from Foucault's political analysis is that power cannot be presented anymore in repressive terms only, as something that is exercised top-down.<sup>7</sup> Today politics is characterized by a situation in which the distribution and exercise of power undermines the survival and growth of large and stable political bodies.

The crisis of the state manifests itself in, among other areas, the proliferation of NGOs, or so-called third sector organizations. This kind of





social formation seeks to fill the space freed as a result of the process of governmentalization of the state, and they promote group interests. Such organizations usually face the same problem as the state or political parties based on it—the problem of representation. If state represents the interests of the people, as in classical political discourse, then the weakening of the state shakes the ground of the notion of representation as such. Representation was the function of the state proper, and when state becomes just another member of government, NGOs find themselves in urgent need to respond to the crisis of representation: even though they might participate in and grow as a result of the weakening of the state, they also need it to carry on filling in the space or function left by its withdrawal. The crisis of the state thus leads to a more general representation crisis.

Representation, especially in its current political form, implies homogeneity of shared values, goals, or convictions. Often it is based on claims that not everyone has an opportunity to express and fight for their convictions, needs, and interests, and therefore they need to be represented by someone on their behalf. However, after a short while problems occur as different and uncompromising needs and convictions by separate individuals cannot ground political programs and struggles and get subsumed under one leading ideology that levels differences.<sup>8</sup> Ideology cements party politics. Fixed and written into a program or manifesto, it provides a basis for a principle upon which to choose strategies, tactics, actions, and the boundaries of representation for the party, that is, who belongs to it and who does not and based upon which parameters. The crisis of representation and ideology leads to the crisis of party politics or any politics based on affiliation, as they are interdependent. Common goals and principles are failing; dissent is spreading and still seen as something dangerous to ruling ideology; representatives encounter serious objections to their representational claims. Foucault's call for micropractices to substitute metaideology meets considerable fear and anxiety of identity loss and even dissolution of political action as such.<sup>9</sup>

Issues of representation and ideology in turn must be supported by the situation of political affiliation—that is, of acceptance of some ideology as a basis to become a part of, or on the side of, a party, a group, etc. Sometimes it is phrased as a “giving of oneself” to the party, that is, giving all one's energy to struggle with fellow party members for the same ideals and goals. Of course, affiliation is directly related to the notion of “philia”—love and friendship that would divide the world into party friends and party enemies. Logically, it seems that the lack of an enemy means the lack of any basis for political struggle. This classic formulation of Carl Schmitt has been critically analyzed by Derrida in the book *The Politics of Friendship*: “the loss of enemy would imply the loss of political ‘I,’” he writes. “Today it is possible

to give a few examples of this disorientation of political field, where the main enemy already seems unclear."<sup>10</sup> While Derrida offers a political alternative based on reformulation of the notion of "fraternal friendship" beyond the opposition friend/enemy, I would like to trace an alternative that is far from either of these models and instead is based on what could be called a "maternal politics."

THE UNION OF THE COMMITTEES OF SOLDIERS'  
MOTHERS OF RUSSIA

Such is the mandate of artists and intellectuals in times of crisis and radical change: to redefine what "political subject" means and can be. Against the failure of the artistic and intellectual class typically charged with this undertaking, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (UCSMR), or in short, CSM, arose as an exemplary effort that transcended the crisis of representation, ideology, and politics of party affiliation. Founded in 1989, CSM works in several directions, more or less connected to the military and other political bodies—specifically working to reform them. It provides legal support and finds financial help for families of dead soldiers, consults on legal aspects of compulsory national military service, develops publications on death cases in the army, and lobbies at parliamentary hearings on amnesty laws and military reforms. The CSM was one of the very few organizations, and the singularly most active and visible one, to oppose the Russian war in Chechnya. The Soldiers' Mothers carried out direct actions in Chechnya to bring attention to the war and to stop certain military offenses. Besides human rights issues related to the army, they demanded that women be included in military decision making. In 1995 they were awarded the Sean MacBride Peace Prize for the actions during the war. Altogether more than ten thousand people came for help to the CSM office in Moscow alone. Moreover, almost 100 percent of individual complaints on human rights violations were resolved successfully. The total number of visitors to all regional CSM offices to date is about forty thousand people.<sup>11</sup>

In order to fully understand the success and consequence of this initiative we need to consider the political implications and ethical force of the notion of "mother" and "motherhood" in Russia. In particular we need to consider the ways that the notion of motherhood plays on and breaks apart the logic of separation into "us" and "them." Tradition insists that a mother comes from a caring and intimate sphere. Under this convention the figure of the mother views any adversary as a potential friend before it is cast as other (as will be exemplified in the ideas of Levinas, among others, and supported in the Russian cultural imagination by literature that even brings this

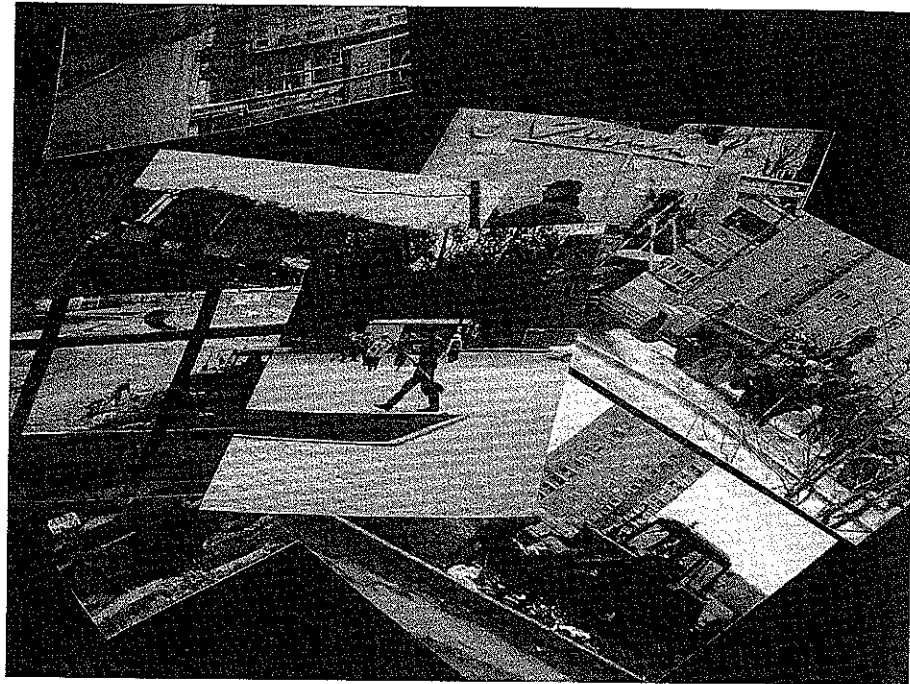


FIGURE 9.3. Photographs showing national servicemen engaged as free manual labor, provided at the Press-Conference. Photograph by Irina Aristarkhova.



FIGURE 9.4. Photograph from the Press-Conference showing UCSMR members and the Foundation of the Right of the Mother members speaking to Moscow reporters. Photograph by Irina Aristarkhova.

maternal indiscriminate love to serve revolution, such as in Maxim Gorky's seminal novel *Mother*, written in 1907). Through this extrapolation of the intimate (homely) into the public (community), as I will analyze further, *Soldiers' Mothers* surpass the problem of collaboration with other groups and organizations that are based on codes of affiliation. The loss of "enemy" does not limit or reduce their political activism as the notion of mother is ambivalent toward such dilemmas—every enemy has (had) a mother. Maternity and motherhood (though not necessarily connected) allow for care to be expressed toward others without any proof or need of any confirmation of one's sincerity. The idea of political, ideological affiliation does not make any sense within the context of motherhood. Correspondingly, the validity of a mother's interests and convictions does not need a Program, a Code, or a Law.

#### LEVINAS, IRIGARAY, AND THE POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD

For the past few decades the notions of mother and motherhood have been actively discussed in feminist literature, especially through the works of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. The ethical implications of maternity and motherhood have been explored by Drucilla Cornell, among others. In addition to the fact that their ideas are meant to transform the contemporary discourse on ethics and subjectivity, they have direct relation to engendering alternative political strategies and concepts. Unfortunately, this political dimension that relates to direct political action often remains unexplored, producing an all too sanitized split between theory and practice, rendering both of them unproductive and frustrated.

By definition in our communal and philosophical tradition, the mother is, as Levinas puts it, "a being for the other, and not for oneself."<sup>12</sup> The idea of care, developed by a friend and early mentor of Levinas—Heidegger—was taken up with negative anxious implications by Sartre, though for Levinas care, based on the maternal, has always been a possibility, a welcoming of positive ethics, of ethics as such. Obviously, this connection between friend and other without implying other as a potential enemy first is a possibility of a different kind of politics that has been developed by *Soldiers' Mothers* in a radically activist and embodied form, and without "forgetting the mother" (as is the case of writings by Levinas).

Levinas uses the maternal relation as a door that opens onto ethical and religious dimensions. However, maternal relation is only a passive possibility, though the one that opens itself up to allow the appearance of the realm of the social and cultural. Similarly, for Kristeva the experience

of motherhood is preoedipal, that is, it exists outside the establishment of culture and society. It is in this sense the origin of both ethics and politics, both of which come *after*, as a result of leaving a mother behind. Just as for Kristeva, the maternal is presocial and precultural for Levinas. The main function that the mother serves for Levinas, the one that is fundamental to our analysis, is its alternative relation to others. With the mother's help, Levinas argues, one can relate to others outside the enemy/friend opposition, making the impossible possible—overcoming the ontological situation of singular Being thrown into the world by no one. In the case of Levinas, it becomes even more general—the mother is situated so as to highlight that ethical relation, although the mother herself is not placed anywhere within the realm of the ethical but instead as its ground or origin.

When the maternal is left behind we have to ask ourselves, why? Why is the mother left behind, why has that home to be locked away from the world around it? And why is the mother positioned within/as home in the first place? The maternal function, as Irigaray puts it, serves as a basis of social and political order, the same for the order of desire, but the mother herself is always limited by the necessity. As soon as necessity—individual or collective—is fulfilled, often there is nothing left over from the maternal function. There is also nothing left from this mother's energy to fulfill her own desires and needs, especially in its religious, political, and social dimensions.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that in some sense claiming the political as maternal and vice versa is to go against the grain of all traditions, political and philosophical, as tradition itself is based on leaving the mother behind in the first place. Since traditionally mothers are eased out of civil and military societies, from culture as such, what remains of them is *an idea of mother*, translatable into Motherland and Homeland. She herself is welcomed only as a metaphor.

Rendered as both anterior and interior to the public realm, the mother must remain outside the social and religious fields and cannot be a political activist herself without references to masculine political subjectivity. Mother represents the unspoken and the precultural; everything that is before the self is articulated politically. This Levinasian position undermines his claim to achieve a new ethics of difference (against the ontological tradition of sameness), since it starts from acknowledging and then subsuming the difference of the mother. It exiles mother from the realm of political, social, and cultural, and especially theological. It appropriates maternal experience to go onto another level—the level of ethics and the proper relation to the other.

Irigaray has argued that the Western tradition is really a matrificial tradition<sup>14</sup> where the figure of the mother is symbolically annihilated for

reproduction of our cultures and where reproduction itself becomes a political metaphor. Therefore, the active embodied presence of mothers simultaneously as mothers and political activists is indigestible by a political realm that is based on the disavowal of motherhood. This *coming back* of mothers into the political—not as literary or philosophical genres but as embodied political actors—constitutes a unique phenomenon. This works especially well in post-Soviet Russia, where it is possible to capitalize on and incorporate fragments of two strong, albeit competitive, formations that used the image of the mother: Old Orthodox Christian and Soviet.<sup>15</sup>

#### CSM POLITICAL INNOVATIONS AND EFFECTS

On the one hand, the success of maternal politics is boosted by a particular sociocultural importance that “motherhood” and “mother” enjoy under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Christian tradition. (I would stress here that CSM is hijacking these formulations for their own political struggle rather than taking them uncritically as valid definitions of motherhood. It is one of the many tactics they employ from the existing cultural context, and the question whether participants actually believe it or not is irrelevant to their action.) On the other hand, “governmentalization” of women’s position in Soviet times introduced the formulation of the Soviet woman as an active political subject. For example, Kristeva noted that Eastern European socialist countries recognized women as social-political subjects, which allowed women there “to grow up without slave mentality and a sense of submission and rejection.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the problems with Kristeva’s statement (any political recognition in Soviet times was a problematic concept and could be treated rather as a wish, not to mention that being named subjects, on par with male subjects, does not really change the status quo of sexual indifference), it is clear that no more nor less but *symbolically, on paper*, Soviet female citizens were assumed to be active political subjects under this process of governmentalization.<sup>17</sup> And indeed, the CSM model borrowed heavily from their Soviet female predecessors in many ways.

At the same time, we should acknowledge the existence of other cultural forces that insist on maternal silence in the social domain, and it makes CSM’s injection of maternal experience into the political activist sphere transformational for political activism. According to Chalier, in Levinas the “maternal body knows subjectivity” only “by its blood and flesh.”<sup>18</sup> It seems ethics for women, if it exists at all, can only be drawn from “being mother” and nothing more. Mothers from CSM made this “nothing more” into the resource of politicization of the maternal position and a means for finding a way out of a political crisis of representation and affiliation.

Maternal politics does not rely on the typical political subscription to a united ideology, as the notion of mother allows "some mothers" to enact corporeal identification with each other without elimination of their differences. It provides a platform for their political activism without a need to sign or claim anything common "through conviction." Mothers do not need to sign a maternal constitution or program. Therefore the question of affiliation is not an issue; it is only a question of embodied politics. Their code is "ideal" and "beyond" political ideology, since most ideologies try to reach the impossible—ethical force and justification of motivations as only mothers have (by definition, love and care for others, not oneself). It is common for political parties and groups to mimic the caring, sacrificial image of the preoedipal fantasy (as in Soviet slogans such as "the party cares for you as a mother").

When one represents another, he positions himself on the same level as that other. Sameness is the basis of representation and the experience of difference usually undermines representational politics. The more one is the same as those whom he represents (in class, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, disability, age, etc.), the more he assumes the right to represent others. All of this changes with the Soldiers' Mothers. They do not represent other mothers who love their children, they represent those who are radically different from them, but with whom they are connected through the *symbol* of motherhood—any actual or potential soldier.

They claim all of them as their potential children, though they might differ from those whom they represent in any socially and culturally meaningful aspect—ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, etc. Kin relations usually are not even included in the political realm proper as they belong to family law, but in any case most of the time they represent someone else's children. That's why in their case the question and problem of representation and its crisis does not undermine their struggle and activism (though it has to be negotiated every other day; it is not something that comes with the name, but through embodied action, and adjustment of its tactics and strategies). Maternal politics seems to take upon itself traditionally passive maternal function, through dissolving itself actively in maternal love, making it a source of its political struggle. In this way, maternal love proves itself as a political origin for political subjectivity, usurping the traditional role of artists and intellectuals.

Many have criticized this engagement of motherhood as a source of any kind of politics. Many feminist political writings, especially Western ones, considered motherhood to be an obstacle to a woman's political activism, especially in its current social and cultural forms. CSM in this case undermines the view under which the traditional notion of motherhood is



rejected as social, religious, or cultural construct or stereotype. CSM actually does the opposite—it puts it into the center of its political agenda without defining it or discussing it. It gives updates and corrects the traditional notion of motherhood that had been stripped of all communal meanings and confined to the silence of the preoedipal Home, Heimat, house, dwelling, intimacy, and gives it its rightful place in the middle of political struggle within the state-military machine. Indeed, Soldiers' Mothers ground their politics in the embodiment of maternal experience, and they place such "reductive" singular function upon their action. They take the risk. They show how effective this tactic is, as a new political strategy, if it is used in a situationist manner. By trial and error they are constantly fine-tuning their tactics. Who, when, and how is doing maternal politics brings as much to the result as full understanding of its limitations and dangers, and one's preparation to face them.<sup>19</sup>

In order to be effective, maternal politics draws from its specific context, being extremely mobile and flexible in responding to it. As a result, their political actions question universalist sweeping generalizations in discussions of maternal practices in Western and Russian theories of motherhood—be they psychoanalytic post-Lacanian, post-structuralist, Marxist, or Russian Orthodox. In a post-Soviet predominantly Orthodox context that is still blind to its own ethnic and religious heterogeneity, CSM is not desubjectivizing mothers (an alternative suggested by Irigaray and others within the Catholic context), but resubjectivizing them (since they were already made into subjects by Soviet government). Embodying motherhood with its body politics, Soldiers' Mothers unsettle the force of reproductive and maternal metaphors used within the political sphere (especially in Russia where reproductive terminology of Marxism with its laws and spirals of reproduction and self-birth is so widespread). They enact and use structures traditionally positioned far away from embodied motherhood, though based on it; for example, army and economy have always been in need of the "young."

CSM actions place the problem of position and place of motherhood at the center of political, legal, and ethical questions, shifting it from family-planning issues into the questions of government, citizenship, military practices, and the law itself. By putting themselves into the center of these spheres, displacing attention from "mothers" onto "children—all citizens," they avoid family/community dualism radically and productively. Without question, CSM creates new forms of political subjectivity that open up a possibility of the ethical relation to the maternal from others and the maternal toward others. It is well known that Irigaray, Cornell, and others work on reformulating the notion of motherhood in terms of maternal ethics and in law. However, maternal politics embodied in the form of CSM forces

us, theorists, to constantly localize our conceptions and negotiate them with existing innovations of political activism and its practices. Only then can we radicalize the process of building up alternatives to existing political crisis grounded in the friend/enemy paradigm.

No doubt it is possible to pose other criticisms to CSM and its activity, and to my notion of "maternal politics" born out of their work. One can claim that their actions reproduce sacrificial norms of motherhood, when mother is defined through altruism and self-denial. One might also claim the opposite: their work reveals that motherhood has always been "sadistic" and "egoistic" (phallic?), as mothers need their children to validate themselves, using them as property or exchange value. It is possible to claim that it is political reactionism, and such organizations are not stable. Certainly, what they do is unique and cannot be seen as a simple exercise of a few people. What is important is that it has worked effectively and ethically since 1989 in a situation of political stagnation and the crisis of the Russian political system, and Western party politics or left politics as well. While many activists resort to old types of representational politics or "no exit" pessimism, these acts of political innovation and the success of Soldiers' Mothers allow us to widen our own horizons of political resistance, both practically and conceptually.

It is interrogation of the ethics of politics itself through the position of the "mother" that complicates the "self-other" division by using it for political subject position. There is no other subject position that is defined *and experienced* in such "selfless" terms, such nonpolitical and nonsocial terms (outside of the social realm) as parental position. And though the paternal aspect, more specifically, the male aspect of the parental couple (father and son), is often cited as the foundation of religious, missionary, literary, political, and other types of social structures, the maternal aspect is rarely represented outside its subjective, psychological, presymbolic, biological, or psychoanalytic trappings. "Becoming a mother" in this sense is not a gesture of radical literary or artistic experimentation, identity swapping, transgression of sexual character, or medical or biological miracle most often related to womb envy. It is an open and silent *invitation* to join, facilitate, help, get help, partake in an on-going political struggle of a group of a few women with the military and state apparatus of Russia.<sup>20</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Some of the representatives of this tendency are A. Solzhenitsyn, influential film director, actor N. Mikhalkov, and artist and founder of the neoacademism art movement T. Novikov.

2. A leading Russian philosopher expressed this feeling and refusal to succumb to

it through the following words: "Susan Buck-Morss examines the work of the Moscow artist Faibisovich, and we hear that this is 1970s technique, that things have moved on. And indeed you can say that, but the artist disappears. He is lost in the technique of the representation of his own image. It turns out that his system of representation is so hackneyed that all images coming from this technique have long lost their value. So what are we to do now?"

"I too work, and I too know what has already been done and thought. But what if I have not thought about it yet for myself! America has been reading and writing dissertations on Georges Bataille for thirty years, but I am only now planning to write something on him. What am I to do? Not to write on Bataille? Or de Sade, just because there is already an entire tradition of thinking on him, is he closed to me? It is ridiculous to talk like this. I am in my own time, in my own spot, and in that time I speak, reason and think. I am a live thinking, writing, drawing being. I live and I do. We move and live. It seems to me this is where freedom is." Valery Podoroga, *Fresh Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture* (New York: Phaidon, 2000), 41.

3. A. Osmolovsky, Mail-Radek Text 37: 05.03.98, trans. by Alexey Kovalev. Formerly available at <http://www.anarch.ru>.

4. In June 2006 the Russian DUMA—Parliament voted 347 to 87 and abolished the "Against All" option from all future ballots. See O. Kireev Mailgetto #181 at <http://www.getto.ru/mailgetto.html#>.

5. A. Osmolovsky, ed., *Iskysstvo bez opravdani: Katalog vystavki. 10–26 Mai 2004* [Art without justifications: exhibition catalog] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi nauchno-issledovatel'sky musei arkhitektury imeni Shchuseva, 2004), 6–7, translation mine.

6. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (London: Harvester Press, 1991), 103.

7. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 81–102.

8. Here I mean by "ideology" a number of ideas and convictions that are written in Party Programs, art manifestos, or Codes. It is a "party ideology" and does not refer here to a Marxist notion of ideology or its derivatives.

9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) is one example of this "no exit" argument, a highly convincing attitude toward a political action that is not grounded in common shared principals.

10. "Tradition of politics that is rooted in differentiation and careful search for friends and enemies can be traced to Aristotle. Following this tradition, Schmidt makes a conclusion that: 'Special political distinction (*die spezifisch politische Unterscheidung*), to which we can reduce all political action and notion, is a distinction (*Unterscheidung*) between friend and enemy.'" Cited in Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. G. Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 84–85.

11. Here and in other places the sources are UCSMR Annual Report, 2002, at <http://www.ucsmr.ru>, as well as in V. D. Melnikova, ed., *II International Congress of Soldiers' Mothers "For Life and Freedom" 2000: Presentations and Documents* (Moscow: Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, 2000); *III International Congress of Soldiers' Mothers "For Life and Freedom" 2002: Presentations and Documents* (Moscow: Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, 2002); and personal correspondence.

12. Levinas, cited in C. Chalier, "Ethics and the Feminine," in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 126.

13. Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. M. Whitford (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 178–90.

14. For example, *ibid.*; Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accomodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (London: Routledge, 1991); and K. Oliver, "The Crisis of Meaning," in *After the Revolution: On Kristeva*, ed. J. Lechte and M. Zournazi (Sydney: Artspace Visual Arts Centre, 1998), 79–96.

15. Irina Aristarkhova, "Women and Government in Bolshevik Russia," in *Comparative Labour Studies Working Papers 4:1995* (Coventry: University of Warwick, 1995). Full text available at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/complabstuds/russia/irawp.doc>.

16. Julia Kristeva, "Talking about *Polylogue*: Interview with Francoise van Rossum-Guyon (1977)," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. T. Moi, trans. S. Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 110–17.

17. I have argued elsewhere that this process started long before perestroika, under Bolshevik rule. See Aristarkhova, "Women and Government in Bolshevik Russia," chapter 3.

18. Chalier, "Ethics and the Feminine," 127.

19. In 2004, Russian authorities under Putin's directive started systematic sabotage of CSM's work. It has included, among other actions, IRA (tax) investigation; legal charges against individual members across Russia for spying and treason; changes to political parties law, making it virtually impossible for the newly formed Soldiers' Mothers party to stand in elections; coaching mass media outlets, especially television stations, not to give Soldiers' Mothers air time and coverage of their work; and the assassination of Anna Politkovskaya, a rare journalist known for her open support for and collaboration with Soldiers' Mothers as well as continuing critique of the Chechen war, on October 7, 2006, in Moscow.

20. I would like to thank Valentina Melnikova, CSM Moscow branch, Anatoly Osmolovsky, and Oleg Kireev for their kind assistance in preparing this text.

