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**To Burn or to Howl: The Russian “New Wave” and the Beat  
Generation. Are They Twins or Simply Distant Cousins?**

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Generation. Are They Twins or Simply Distant Cousins?**

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **To Burn or to Howl: The Russian “New Wave” and the Beat Generation. Are They Twins or Simply Distant Cousins?**

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Supervisors: Thomas J. Garza, Michael Pesenson

Vassily Aksyonov’s novel, *The Burn* and Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” are central to my contention that a direct and palpable link exists between the literary, jazz and underground youth movements existent in the USSR and US in the postwar years. In his novel, Aksyonov uses many devices and literary motifs that do not seem out of place in the work of Ginsberg or other members of the Beat Generation. The groundbreaking poem “Howl” utilizes a similar sense of verbal gymnastics that is present in the writing of Aksyonov. Both pieces make use of aspects of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, the medieval concept of the ‘safety valve,’ Billingsgate and confessional tone, among others in a sort of Dionysian bacchanal. Central to both movements is a sense of rebellion and reaction towards an increasingly conservative society, as well as a search for truth through the use and abuse of illicit substances. It is apparent that a direct correlation exists between the stuffy and isolationist outlook of postwar America and the stagnation and decline of the Brezhnev era Soviet Union as depicted in

*The Burn*. The characters depicted within are searching for something that the system will not and cannot provide. And like Akhmatova, Ginsberg is also concerned with the concepts of the “high” and the “low” with regards to culture. Both authors teeter between the concepts of beauty and beatification and self-abuse and self-destruction in their quest to find universal truth. The Russian “New Wave” of literature, of which Akhmatova was a prominent member, simply shares too much in common with the Beat movement to be a mere coincidence. In this paper I will detail these many similarities and the possible reasons for them, as well as delve deeper into the connection that both literary movements shared with jazz and the culture that surrounds it, and how these subcultures were able to impact both their respective governments and the generations to come.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction and Opening Remarks

For most people jazz, and the culture that surrounds it is not the first thing that comes to mind when the topic of the Soviet Union is broached for discussion. However, this is misleading and historically inaccurate. In fact the Soviet Union possessed a vibrant and lively underground jazz and culture movement, that dates as far back as the 1940s. Much to the chagrin of the Komsomol, KGB, and even Stalin himself, Western modes of dress, music and culture (or approximations thereof) were able to successfully and continuously infiltrate the Workers Paradise behind the Iron Curtain (железный занавес.) For a small band of disaffected Soviet youth, jazz, and the freedom, independence and style that it personified became a central mode of expression that sparked the first legitimate subculture in the Soviet Union. From this revelation, the Stilyagi (stylish ones or hipsters) movement was born. The Soviet writer Vassily Aksyonov, as a member of the “New Wave” in Russian literature movement, (also known as Young Prose or the «шестидесятники») helped to chronicle many aspects of the Soviet jazz underground movement with his seminal novel, *Ожог* (*The Burn*, 1980). Aksyonov proved to be a highly influential writer with Per Dalgard stating “together with E. Evtushenko, B. Akhmadulina, A. Voznesensky, A. Gladilin, Vysotsky and Neizvestnyy, Aksyonov was the most prominent representative of this movement” (Dalgard, 77). Based on the style

and content, as well as the influence ultimately wielded by the novel, it is difficult to disagree with this assessment. The novel depicts the chaotic nature of Moscow and its inhabitants during the Brezhnev era with a style and sense that often mirrors the American Beat movement in literature. This movement took place in the United States beginning in the late 1940s and continued until the advent of the more widespread cultural movements of the 1960s. Aksyonov's masterpiece is central to my contention that a direct and palpable link exists between the jazz and underground youth movements in the USSR and its contemporary counterpart in the US as exemplified by such writers as Allen Ginsberg (particularly his groundbreaking effort, "Howl,") Jack Kerouac, and other members of the Beat Generation.

But the question of how these contemporaneous movements occurred must be raised and explored. The similarities that exist between these movements add up to much more than mere coincidence, as their width and breadth attests to. Members of both sets of movements were clearly rebelling against the status quo in a determined effort to rise above their current situations. In the same article, Dalgard elaborates: "Basically the Beat Generation and the "New Wave" were non-political movements, but they both rejected the blind materialism of their respective systems..." (Dalgard, 77). And while at their core, neither the Beat, nor the Soviet "New Wave" movements were inherently political, it is important to stress that in addition to anti-materialism both movements were

equally concerned with affecting societal change. It was hoped that once these societal changes came into existence, a political discourse could then be entered into and political change could then realistically and organically have the possibility to come about. Both literary movements were familiar with each other, however initially only on a limited basis. The celebrated “New Wave” poet, Andrei Voznesensky elaborates on the similarities, differences and mutual awareness between the movements in an interview with Lauridsen and Dalgard taken in 1984 stating:

I think it is first of all a democratization, that is, an appeal to the street, to the lower parts, against conservatism, against hierarchy, both there and here... We knew Allen Ginsberg in the sixties... but at that time we only knew Ginsberg, and we liked his style, but we did not know much of what he stood for. Our conditions were different. (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 41)

But how could these simultaneous and hyper-connected movements come about in these politically disparate and diametrically opposed countries? What came to pass in the USSR that helped to create the Stilyagi movement and coincidentally what occurred in the US to give rise to the Beat Generation? When asked about the simultaneity of the movements from the same interview, Voznesensky gives a typically esoteric and poetical answer equating it to the physical properties of a wave, cosmic forces, and the collective nature and power of the human psyche (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 40-41). When asked a similar question by the same duo, another leading light of the “New Wave” movement, Anatoly Gladilin responded, “...there was simply something in the

air...(Lauridsen, Dalgard, 125). He then goes on to elaborate on his take about the simultaneity of the movements: “Now that’s another intriguing riddle. But apparently it’s because the two big countries, in spite of enormous differences, do follow certain common laws of internal development.” (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 127). Noted literary critic Cynthia Simmons seems to agree with this assessment stating, “...the younger generation in the early sixties, in the West and in the Soviet Union, was almost involuntarily compelled to seek societal and cultural restructuring” (Simmons, 51). The consensus then, seems to be that these movements happened almost of their own accord. The need for change on both sides of the Iron Curtain was readily apparent to those of a certain bent. Drastic times call for drastic measures and those that heard the call did not have the luxury of ignoring it. They simply didn’t have a choice.

It is now apparent with hindsight that a myriad of postwar realities combined in such a way that the disaffected youth of both burgeoning superpowers instinctively reacted in a very similar fashion. It is also important to keep in mind that both the US and the USSR came out as victors in World War II. In the US this engendered a sense of superiority and well being, as well as a feeling of being untouchable in the global sense, both economically and culturally. And while this sense of superiority also proliferated in the USSR, it was also tinged with a sense of immense loss. The Soviets had to undertake the daunting task of the massive reconstruction of many major cities that were utterly

destroyed during the Nazi invasion. Later, as the Cold War intensified, Ginsberg came to believe ardently “that the two nations mirrored each other, but this time the mirror images were more menacing” (Raskin, 95). In his book *American Scream*, Jonah Raskin continues:

In 1969, after the police riot at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the Soviet military invasion of Czechoslovakia, [Ginsberg] was even more convinced of the idea of two evil superpowers. Russia and America were both “police states,” [and] Both dig the same hot cold war.” Communists and capitalists could change places and nothing would be different. And both countries were antagonistic to genuine poets and poetry. (Raskin, 95)

Perhaps more relevant to this discussion, and to the dawn of the *Stilyagi* movement, however are the events that occurred in the Soviet Union at the conclusion of World War II. Returning Soviet soldiers, officers, officials and diplomats were exposed to jazz, swing and other Western musical forms, in addition to other modes of culture hitherto denied them, on a large scale during their time in Western Europe. The soldiers brought these records and other artifacts back with them in droves, and for the first time in Soviet history these recordings became available to the ordinary public on a larger scale. In large part this was due to the same innovation and dedication that led to the practice of *samizdat* (самиздат) or self-publishing, in which copies of banned or controversial literature would pass from person to person in hand copied editions. In similar fashion the tradition of *magnitizdat* (магнитиздат,) or the ingenious process of duplicating forbidden Western music onto reel-to-reel tape, or cheap

plastic disks, which were usually fashioned from old X-ray plates was born. This process was a revelation and played a large role in exposing jazz to the public at large, and like *samizdat* was very difficult for the authorities to effectively police.

When taken in context with the newfound freedoms and the relaxed social environment enjoyed by the Soviet population during the war, (which was exacerbated by the devil may care attitude that can develop amongst human beings during times of immense upheaval,) it should come as little surprise that a portion of Soviet youth embraced these newfound and exciting trappings of Western culture.<sup>1</sup> In an interview conducted in 1982, Aksyonov describes the beginnings of the Stilyagi movement in the early 1950s and elaborates on how it crossed over into artistic, musical and literary circles:

...the stilyagi were Soviet society's first dissidents. It expressed itself only in clothing, manners and tastes but it was an esthetic dissidence... All the time youthful, musical groups were springing up. Exhibitions began to appear... The first touring musicians from outside the Soviet Union appeared... Literary groups sprang up. I began at that time, to go to a youth club in the Petrograd quarter. It was my first such literary association. There I met those with whom I would be friends and working alongside for long years afterwards. (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 17)

The movement began to accelerate in earnest in the wake of the death of Stalin in 1953, and for many at the time it seemed as if a sort of renaissance was occurring in the Soviet Union. In many ways it can be said that the underground

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<sup>1</sup> These freedoms included a relaxed attitude to censorship, and well as a relaxation of persecution against the Orthodox Church. Indeed, for the first time in Soviet history, Stalin incorporated traditional Russian folk heroes, and religious figures and icons in an effort to whip up patriotism for the Motherland and Russia itself, as opposed to the Soviet Union.

jazz movement, the Stilyagi movement and “New Wave” literary movement that helped to engender them acted as a safety valve on Soviet society in much the same way as Carnivals did in medieval Europe. And for many participants in the scene this safety valve was necessary. The youth of Soviet Russia felt that this newfound expression and cultural determinism was hard won by their parents and relatives during the sacrifice and privation endured during the Great Patriotic War. These newfound freedoms were not something that they were prepared to give up lightly or without a struggle and no amount of persecution or ridicule from the majority of Soviet society could dissuade them or their actions.

The parallels between these two seemingly disparate movements encompass more than just strictly cultural aspects. Aksyonov employed many devices and literary motifs in his work that would not seem out of place in the work of such Beat luminaries as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac or William Burroughs. A sense of rebellion and reaction towards conservative, stagnating societies is central to both movements. Additionally, they functioned as a search for truth through the use and abuse of illicit substances, among other things, in an attempt to break free of societal constraints in the attempt to find something real. Aksyonov’s novel also possesses an almost confessional and autobiographical tone to it, which is yet another attribute that the text shares with the Beats. This fact is especially exemplified by the existence of voluminous

correspondence between the writers in the Beat movement themselves.<sup>2</sup> It is also readily apparent that a direct correlation exists between the stuffy and isolationist outlook of post World War II America as personified by McCarthyism and the burgeoning military-industrial complex, and the stagnation and decline of Brezhnev era Soviet Union as depicted in *The Burn*. Another parallel between the movements exists in the very name of the Beats themselves, or, more precisely the name by which they came to be more commonly known: Beatniks. Peter Tamony tells us that

Beatnik is a blend concocted by Herb Caen, columnist of the San Francisco Chronicle. Sputnik had blasted off in October, 1957. The Slavic – nik had been surfacing in Al Capp’s comic strips for several years: nogoodnik, McNooknik, Liddle Noodnik. On May 4, 1958, Caen noted: “Novelist Jack ‘On the Road’ Kerouac, the voice of the Beatniks...” (Tamony, 277)

The characters portrayed within the majority of works of both the Beat and “New Wave” movements on both sides of the Iron Curtain are actively searching for something that the system will not and cannot provide. Faced with adverse (to say the least) artistic conditions, writers and musicians from both sides of the divide developed new ways to express themselves, and in turn developed a new artistic form. Authority, be it Western, Nazi or Soviet has always had a problem with popular movements in culture, and this fact is especially true of music.

Anything that can galvanize the people in a way not sanctioned by the State is

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<sup>2</sup> For elaboration on the confessional tone of both Aksyonov and the Beats see “The Poetic Biographies of Vasilij Aksenov” by Cynthia Simmons and “Cold War Correspondents: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and the Political Economy of Beat Letters,” by Oliver Harris.

seen as harmful and destructive, and those in charge have always moved quickly to quell such movements. Soviet writers and critics alike were certainly aware of the Beat generation and their work, especially as the 1960s progressed. The official party line on the movement was, not surprisingly, derogatory. According to Maurice Friedberg: “The beatniks and the hipsters remained undisciplined and somewhat mystical anarchists; they did not submit to a discipline necessary, in Soviet estimate, in a “meaningful” struggle (Friedberg, 549). Under such circumstances, it became apparent to both sets of writers that something had to give for them to be able to fulfill even a modicum of their collective artistic potential. Consequently both groups, though separated by many thousands of miles, both geographically and politically, also came to the same conclusion. For many of them the only decision to make was whether to “burn” or to “howl,” and the matter was not taken lightly. In fact the title of Aksyonov’s novel was meant to be intriguing and to provoke thought among potential readers: “The burn of the title refers both to Stalinism and to the burn of creativity” (Meyer, 509). And in many instances the result of this dilemma was one and the same, namely the pursuit of artistic freedom and the (self) destruction, both literally and metaphorically, of the old order that inevitably follows such brazen trailblazing in the face of unforgiving authority. It is also important to note that writers of both movements suffered retribution and repression from their respective governments. Ginsberg’s poem and those who published it were put on trial for

obscenity in 1957, and both the Soviet press and the Soviet authorities repeatedly vilified Aksyonov. M. Ivakhnenko reports:

Писателя называли псевдомучеником и провокатором, агентом ЦРУ, лжецом и клеветником...(Ивахненко, 163)

(The writer was labeled as a pseudo-martyr, a provocateur, an agent of the CIA, a liar and a slanderer...)³

The abuse eventually became bad enough that Aksyonov was finally forced to immigrate to the US in 1980. He only returned to his homeland after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It is also worth noting that Aksyonov's influential work had little to no chance of being published in the Soviet Union. N. Kolesova notes:

Характерно, что автор изначально не рассчитывал на публикацию в Советском Союзе и «Ожог» был впервые опубликован в Соединенных Штатах. (Колесова, 132)

(It is characteristic that the author didn't count on publication in the Soviet Union and *The Burn* was first published in the United States.)

Aksyonov's novel and Allen Ginsberg's influential poem "Howl" perfectly personify the new confessional outlook on literature, as well as the new artistic sensibilities that developed and came to the fore after World War II. In this thesis I will detail the many similarities that these and other works of the Beat and Russian "New Wave" movements share, be they literary, cultural, linguistic, revelatory or simply hallucinatory.

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³ Translations from the Russian are my own, unless indicated by a citation.

## Chapter 2

### ***The Burn and the “New Wave” of Russian Literature***

Vassily Aksyonov was born in Kazan', USSR on August 20, 1932 during the early years of Stalin's reign. His father Pavel Vasiliyevich Aksyonov was a well respected communist and his mother, Yevgenia Semyonovna Ginzburg was a history teacher at Kazan' University at the time of his birth. The young Aksyonov suffered a tumultuous childhood brought about by the arrest of his mother. She was arrested “under Article 58 (concerning enemies of the people)” (Kustanovich, 94) after being falsely accused of being a Trotskyite sympathizer, and conspiring against the Stalinist regime. Ginzburg was sentenced to the infamous camp at Kolyma, where she eventually went on to chronicle her ordeal in the Soviet GULAG system with the much-respected memoir Крутой маршрут (translated as *Journey Into the Whirlwind and Within the Whirlwind* in English.) The young Aksyonov eventually moved from Kazan' to the town of Magadan near Kolyma in Siberia to be closer to his imprisoned mother (Johnson Jr., 32). This experience stigmatized Aksyonov and labeled him as an ‘enemy of the people,’ (враг народа) a tag which would stay with him for the remainder of his life and which afforded him unwanted attention from the KGB and other branches of Soviet authority. Additionally the designation had the potential under the Stalinist regime to severely limit his opportunities for higher education, as well as any meaningful possible future employment. This background is also shared by one

of the central characters in *The Burn*, Tolya Von Steinbock. Tolya is a “child of the purges, [and] an adult of the “Thaw” refrozen” (Johnson Jr., 47). His experiences are the central catalyst of the novel and, in a unique literary device Aksyonov splits the perspective and personality of the young man among five separate characters, each of whom represent different aspects of Soviet society and its moral and structural decline. In no specific order they are: Samson Apollinariievich Sabler, musician; Aristarkh Apollinariievich Kunitser, scientist; Gennady Apollinariievich Malkolmov, doctor; Radius Apollinariievich Khavastishchev, sculptor; and Pantelei Apollinariievich Pantelei; writer. It is important to note that all of these characters share the same patronymic, which acts as a palpable indicator that they all share the background and experiences of young Tolya. These five iterations represent the paths in life that young man ultimately could have taken but did not. This technique is Aksyonov’s unique way of commenting upon the possibilities now open in the postwar Soviet reality.

Priscilla Meyer elaborates:

One of the consequences of all this was the creation of a new expanded urban intelligentsia, and it is this class which produced the authors of Young Prose. Their experience directly mirrored their middle class, small nuclear family origins: on finishing high school they were not forced to go to war or do hard labor, but rather had a wide range of possibilities open to them. The main force acting on them was the pressure to individual achievement typically produced by nuclear families. Growing up under circumstances analogous to those of youth in the United States, they had similar problems choosing professions and life styles, and therefore took longer to mature than did their parents. (Meyer, 447)

The revelation is an important one that demonstrates both the new reality in the Soviet Union and also acts as another connection to the burgeoning youth movement in the US. It is also important to note that the Apollinarieviches “have all compromised their ideals” and “are hopeless sots” (Simmons, 317). They have been used and abused by the Soviet system, and this fact acts as the catalyst for the spiritual, cultural and often times, morbid, depraved and severely alcoholic quest that they embark upon.

*The Burn* takes place after the initial enthusiasm that surrounded the Khrushchev years and the Thaw. It is the dawn of the stagnant period of Brezhnev and a return to a much more stifling hard-line communism. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 also informs the background of the novel. As Konstantin Kustanovich posits in *The Artist and the Tyrant*:

...The Burn captures the sense of a clear demarcation between the atmosphere of the optimistic sixties and the stagnant early seventies...In *The Burn* despair and hopelessness have replaced the cheerful challenge to the authorities...and the artists have withdrawn into an esoteric idiom instead of staging an open rebellion against the regime. (Kustanovich, 93)

Aksyonov makes the sense of loss and regret due to the collapse of Thaw era reforms explicit throughout the narrative of the novel. A case in point is the remorseful recollection from one of the Apollinarieviches:

Я смотрел на пустую улицу, на покаты́й мертвенный асфальт и на трубку фонаря и ничего, ничего, ничего не помнил из своей жизни.

Все же вспомни хотя бы «золотые пятидесятые» и свинговый обвал и соло под сурдинку – дулу-дулу-бол-бал – и толпу девушек в глубине зала и пустое пространство наощенного паркета за минуту до начала бала, вспомни же! (168)

(I looked at the empty street, at the blank slope of asphalt, and at the lamppost, and I remembered nothing, nothing, nothing that had ever happened in my life.

Even so, I did remember the “golden fifties,” the swing craze, the solos for muted saxophone – boop-boop-boop-a-doop – and the crowd of girls at the back of the hall and the empty expanse of waxed parquet a minute before the start of the ball. Remember?) [Glenny, 194]

In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the rolling back of liberal reforms, these heady times of yore seem as nothing but a distant and impossible dream. It is extremely telling that all he can remember is the music and the effects and feelings that jazz stirred in him. The sense of loss is palpable in these lines and denotes the danger of collective memory loss concerning the way things were and the way that things might have turned out to be. Many on the fringes of Soviet society felt cheated by the rollbacks of Khrushchev’s reforms. In many ways the Stilyagi, jazzmen and writers of this supposed new era had been shown a glimpse of the promise land, only for it to be ripped away from their expectant and deserving grasp. They inherently knew that once these liberal reforms were removed, they would never return again. And of course, this indeed turned out to be the case and many of these writers and artists were forced to immigrate in order to be able to continue working at their craft.

Additionally, the feeling of hopelessness and the urge (or need) to go down willingly with the ship is borne out by the actions of the Apollinarieviches themselves, as well as the renegade American wanderer and all-around raconteur, Patrick Thunderjet. The American personifies all the decadence, debauchery and excess of the West that the Soviet authorities found so deplorable. He is highly intelligent, and well traveled, yet he is also a raging alcoholic with a tenuous grip on reality and an ethical code that can be described as lax to say the least. Thunderjet's arrival in Moscow helps to facilitate the most drunken adventures of the entire novel. In many ways he is the spiritual descendent of Kerouac's character Dean Moriarty, from *On the Road*. He is forever in motion and forever on the take. Thunderjet's priorities revolve solely around the procurement of booze and women. His only concern is living life to the fullest and let the consequences be damned, and he spares no thought for those that get in his way. The debauched American also serves as a flagrant example, showcasing what the path of excess can lead to. He functions as a warning to the fate that is certain to befall the current wave of the Russian intelligentsia if they don't change their tune and turn away from alcohol and other distractions and instead turn their attention back to the political realities of the USSR. Unfortunately, his example is embraced and he is held up as an illustration of how to behave. As a result of this and many other factors, these one time dissidents at the artistic, scientific and cultural vanguard of Soviet

society now solely seem interested in alcohol and the fairer sex as they endlessly carouse and wander drunkenly through the long Moscow nights.

This detail is particularly apparent in the ill-fated and thoroughly depraved excursion to the seaside resort town of Yalta. The section is significant in the overall narrative, as many important themes interweave and are juxtaposed into a coherent, though alcohol drenched whole. Outside of the more culturally aware environs of Moscow, these characters seem all the more bohemian. In fact they seem as if they are from a different planet. And while Yalta is a seaside vacation destination, with all the attendant drunkenness this implies, the expedition of Thunderjet and Pantelei is all together more sinister and irreverent. Our heroes are barefoot, boorish and inebriated to the point of ridiculousness, and they mock and deride all that comes before them. No one is safe from the satirical nature of the author's pen and Aksyonov's drunken heroes hit the sleepy resort town like a bomb. As a consequence chaos ensues everywhere they go. They bombard passersby with flowers and money and wander drunkenly around in various stages of undress. In many ways the drunken spree in Yalta resembles scenes from Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* and in particular the pandemonium that ensues during the chapter "Black Magic and its Expose." Meyer elaborates: "Like the merriment in Bulgakov's Variety Theater during Stalin's purges, the Yalta scenes are a feast during the plague, set against the background of the invasion of Czechoslovakia" (Meyer, 522). Both of these scenes represent

aspects of the carnivalesque. They function as a “safety-valve,” enabling the characters to cast off the daily grind of existence under a totalitarian regime through the abandonment of societal constraints by means of extreme inebriation. For these violations our nascent heroes eventually end up in people’s court on a bevy of petty charges. Aksyonov utilizes the opportunity to lampoon the Soviet judicial system and several allusions are made to the harsh sentences meted out for innocuous offences during Stalin’s reign. However, these are more benign times, and the majority of those waiting to be sentenced are guilty only of petty crimes committed under the influence of alcohol. The entire section is alluding to the fact that the world’s first communist country and the supposed torch bearer for the triumph of worldwide socialism, upholding the rights of the proletariat everywhere, has simply devolved into a nation of hopeless alcoholics, incapable of building anything, let alone socialism.

In *The Burn*, Aksyonov does an excellent job of demonstrating the push and pull of daily life in the Soviet Union. For even the most astute citizens, life in the Soviet Union must have been a confusing, isolating and crippling experience. While the Apollinarieviches can be said to be on a quest for truth, experience and artistic and spiritual fulfillment, it can also be said that they often turn a blind eye to the better aspects of human nature in an effort to reach these goals. This is yet another consequence of the use and abuse of alcohol. All of them are members of the intelligentsia during the stagnant era of Brezhnev and have lived

through the even more repressive era of Stalin, as well as the false dawn of the Thaw under Khrushchev. These once learned men have been beaten down by the system and inherently understand that they must take part in a delicate, and ultimately dangerous dance with the authorities to remain on their collective quest and yet, simultaneously remain under the radar. This dance became increasingly difficult to maintain against ever increasing odds. Aksyonov beautifully recreates the historical scenes in which Khrushchev actually called several writers, who he felt took advantage of the liberalization in the arts, to testify before a committee. Aksyonov, who was summoned himself, does a masterful job of describing the reality of the times through his depiction of Khrushchev's inner monologue during the assembly:

Злой битник всегда был в свитере, очках и бородке, любил шумовую музыку-джаст и насмехался над сталинистами. Сталина и сам Глава очень сильно ненавидел и понемногу выпускал из покойника кишки, но одно дело Сталин, а другое – сталинист: эдак злой битник и до нашей культуры доберется, подточит ядовитыми насмешками ствол нашей культуры, и вообще... попэред партии в пэкло нэ лезь! Пока не поздно по зубам им надо дать, подрубить корешки, а то уж в воздухе дымком стало потягивать, венгерской гарью. Так референты говорят, а ведь они почти все с высшим образованием и классовым чутьем не подкачали. (101-102)

(The wicked beatnik always wore a sweater and glasses, had a little beard, loved noisy “jast music,” and laughed at Stalinists. The Boss himself detested Stalin too and was gradually knocking the stuffing out of the dead monster, but Stalin was one thing and Stalinists were quite another: The wicked beatnik might not stop at our culture, might undermine the very foundations of our culture with his venomous sarcasm. In general, give them an inch and they'll take a mile! They must be given a kick in the teeth before it

was too late, they must be rooted out; there was already a whiff of smoke in the air that had an uncomfortably Hungarian smell to it. So his officials told him, and almost all of them had a university education and their class instincts never let them down.) [Glenny, 116-117]

The passage is an extremely telling one that is loaded with a multitude of meaning. The section perfectly encapsulates the emotional rollercoaster that artists in the Soviet Union underwent during the Thaw era. Optimism for a bright and uncensored future was swiftly swept under the rug as Khrushchev rapidly back peddled on his liberal reforms. The situation in Hungary, as well as art, music and literature at home that rejected Soviet form and notions of Socialist Realism played heavily in this decision. The passage also depicts the paranoia present in the upper echelons of Soviet power, and further illuminates the lack of understanding that those in power had in relation to their citizens. It serves as a palpable reminder that the state is still in control over all aspects of life in the USSR. However, Khrushchev's rescinding of liberal reforms was not enough to keep him in power, and he was eventually ousted from power and replaced by the more staid and hard-line Leonid Brezhnev. With this appointment, the USSR slid back into an isolationist and reactionary reality that placed an overreliance of resources and attention on the military and the arms race. Additionally, it resulted in the era of stagnation that crippled the Soviet Union on economic, intellectual and cultural levels and led to a life of hardship and deprivation for the average Soviet citizen.

The failure of the Intelligentsia in Russia and the Soviet Union has long been a topic of discussion in academic circles. In her article on Aksyonov and Stalinism, Priscilla Meyer goes farther in her condemnation of the Apollinarieviches and their ilk stating: “The members of the intelligentsia, although cast as victims, are shown to be as depraved as their oppressors, and hence unwittingly in collusion with them” (Meyer, 513). This is an important designation, typical of those caught behind the Iron Curtain, and one that the characters of Aksyonov vitally do not share with their Beat counterparts. And while it can be quite comprehensively argued that the Apollinarieviches had no choice but to comply with their Soviet taskmasters, this line of thinking carries a large amount of historical truth. Aksyonov himself addresses the past failings of the Russian intelligentsia:

Не виноваты? Ой ли? А кто выпустил джина из бутылки, кто оторвался от народа, кто заискивал перед народом, кто жирел на шее народа, кто пустил татар в города, пригласил на княженье варягов, пресмыкался перед Европой, отгораживался от Европы, безумно противоборствовал власти, покорно подчинялся тупым диктатурам? Все это делали мы – русская интеллигенция. (189)

(Not our fault? Really? But who let the genie out of the bottle, who cut themselves off from the people, who groveled before the people, who grew fat on the backs of the people, who let the Tatars into the city, invited the Varangians to come and rule over them, licked the boots of Europe, isolated themselves from Europe, struggled madly against the government, submitted obediently to dim-witted dictators? We did all that – we, the Russian intelligentsia.) [Glenny, 221]

Here Aksyonov is acknowledging the shortcomings of his characters and the effects of this admission serve several purposes. Firstly, the disclosure helps to further humanize the Apollinarieviches, their associates and the overall plight of the Soviet intelligentsia. Additionally, it also helps to place the actions and dissent of the Stilyagi in a better-defined context. In his book *Kustanovich* goes into more detail stating: “In the Soviet Union such a desire and a fear of not belonging are cultivated beginning in childhood” (Kustanovich, 93-94). Soviet youth (and indeed all of Soviet society) were indoctrinated to believe that being different was not only unacceptable, but that it also carried the connotation of being essentially un-Soviet. Aksyonov portrays this dichotomy with his depiction of Tolya’s early years when he is still living in Magadan with his exiled mother. Tolya wants to be a model Soviet youth and to be all the things that a normal Soviet boy would aspire to be. However, he is caught between worlds and must reconcile the lofty dictates of the Soviet regime with the grim reality of the unfounded arrest and exile of his mother, in addition to the daily repression faced by his stepfather for his religious beliefs. Under such a repressive society as the Soviet Union, being labeled as ‘undesirable’ was a guaranteed ticket to the GULAG. This political reality makes the rebellion of the Stilyagi and the members of the “New Wave” literary movement all the more remarkable. In the introduction to his book on poet Andrei Voznesensky, Herbert Marshall elaborates on the overall outlook of the postwar generation:

The generation born since the war, however, does not have this built-in inhibition. Those of the older generation, though aware that de-Stalinization has taken place, still, every now and again, look over their shoulders, thinking, "But it could come back!" In the younger generation this does not exist, and they speak out quite frankly. The effect on the older generation is very much like that of a Victorian schoolteacher being talked to by a modern beatnik. This new generation wants to try and express itself in every possible way. (Marshall, xix-xx)

For all intents and purposes, a generation gap (or as Trotsky dubbed it in a nod to Turgenev's great classic of Russian literature, "the problem of fathers and children") [Trotsky, 24], appeared in the postwar Soviet Union that was very much akin to the gap that developed in the US with the coming of age of the postwar 'baby boom' generation. These 'baby boomers' later formed the vanguard of the political and social upheaval that surrounded, and eventually came to personify the Vietnam War years in America, much like the children of de-Stalinization came to make up the ranks of the Stilyagi movement and the jazz era in the Soviet Union.

On the one hand, by playing within the parameters set forth by the Soviet system, Aksyonov's characters tacitly ensure that these tactics of repression will continue into the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the characters portrayed in Beat literature are expressly kicking against the very fabric of the American system itself and are trying to find an alternative means by which to live and prosper. The fact that the Apollinarieviches manifest similar behavior as regards the search for truth in a stagnant and repressive society, and that they all share

characteristics with protagonists as depicted in much of the extant Beat literature is significant. However, it is equally important to keep in mind the severe reprisals they could be subjected to living under a totalitarian regime. This crucial distinction helps to place the behavior of the Apollinarieviches and the Russian intelligentsia into a more historically accurate context. Throughout the work of writers from both the American and Soviet schools, the use and abuse of alcohol and other substances is present. However it is important to note that this usage is not always solely for the purpose of inebriation, but rather additionally acts as a means to acquire some kind of truth, and through this truth a form of salvation. As Cynthia Simmons states "...alcohol was, until the final stages of the Soviet Union, the singular "safety valve" available to the oppressed citizen...(Simmons, 55). Kustanovich expounds on this statement explaining that in reality:

"the Soviet people had only two freedoms left: drinking and sex. Both were officially castigated but in reality were left alone, and not only because leaders of the country on all levels had weaknesses for these pleasures. They were also permitted as a safety valve, similar in a way to the medieval carnival allowed by the authorities. (Kustanovich, 138)

He concludes by stating that these pastimes "were a form of protest...against the official culture" (Kustanovich, 138). And while this thesis is not large enough in scope to fully elucidate on the topic, it is important to consider that the quest for enlightenment through the use of alcohol and other forms of debauchery can be palpably linked to the Russian tradition of the Holy Fool (юродивый.) Several works of modern Russian literature touch on the topic, including *The Burn* and

*Moscow to the End of the Line (Москва – Петушки)* by Venedikt Erofeev, as well as the Czechoslovak novel *Too Loud a Solitude* by Bohumil Hrabal. The connection is yet another link with the Beat movement, which also focused on enlightenment through debauchery, combined with a need for constant movement and experience. Kerouac's *On the Road* and its protagonists, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty (based on the real life member of the Beat Generation, and muse for Kerouac, Neal Cassady) is the most pertinent example of this phenomenon in Beat literature.

The quest and need for these “safety valves,” firmly places Aksyonov's characters within the only acceptable types of “freedom” available in Soviet society. However, when this type of behavior is combined with the extremes that the Apollinarieviches take it to, and is combined with their overall artistic outlook, as well as their background as members of the Intelligentsia, these “safety valves” can be seen in a different light. When used in this context, substances, both illicit and otherwise, take on added significance and help those who imbibe see life, culture and society in general, from a new and enlightened perspective. This heightened awareness in turn naturally leads to a questioning of the overall system in which they live, which is reinforced and expanded upon by exposure to Western culture, such as jazz music. Kustanovich contends that “...the world of alcoholics in *The Burn* offers an alternative to the rigid established rules of human morality in general” and that this is “characteristic of the medieval

grotesque” (Kustanovich, 193). And of course, jazz music itself acted in a similar fashion. Efim Barban contends that:

Crucially, jazz became a form of escapism, of flight from odious and depersonalized reality. In a world where natural and sincere manifestations of emotion were impossible, where everything was stifled by ‘social necessity’, jazz became a safety-valve, an outlet for the realization of individual life, for the manifestation of human privacy in an alienated world. (Barban, 12)

When seen in this context, it is of little wonder that authorities in the Soviet Union feared and repressed those involved in the burgeoning Stilyagi, jazz and literary movements, as well as others belonging to the fringes of society.

Aksyonov witnessed the birth of the Stilyagi movement firsthand and gives his depiction of this mushrooming movement in *The Burn*.

Тогда в танцзале стояли плечом к плечу чуваки и чувихи, жалкая и жадная молодежь, опьяневшая от сырого европейского ветра, внезапно подувшего в наш угол. Бедные, презираемые всем народом стилиаги-узкобрючники, как они старались походить на бродвейских парней - обрезали воротнички ленторговских сорочек, подклеивали к скороходовским подошвам куски резины, стригли друг друга под "канадку"... (29)

(The dance hall was full of guys and chicks standing shoulder to shoulder, a pathetic and eager bunch of kids, drunk with the damp breeze from Europe that suddenly had started blowing in our direction. They were the wretched, universally despised stilyagi, with their narrow, stovepipe pants, trying to look like boys from Broadway; they would clip the collars of their Lentorg Soviet shirts, glue pieces of rubber to the soles of track shoes, and cut each others’ hair in a Canadian crew cut.) [Glenny, 32]

Though the depiction is rather tongue-in-cheek, it gives the reader an insight into both the thoughts of the average Soviet citizen, and into the world of the Stilyagi

themselves. In many ways Aksyonov's work acted as a barometer of the Soviet Union. He pulled no punches in his depiction of the disintegration of the Intelligentsia, or their slow slide into alcohol-fueled apathy. Aksyonov artfully captures the palpable sense of loss at the fact that the Thaw and its policies were being rolled back in favor of a return to the more traditional form of Soviet censorship. The brave new world was coming to an end and Aksyonov depicts those that are going down with the ship in a truthful and heartfelt manner. I will give the final word on the matter to the introduction to part three of Aksyonov's collected works:

Так Василий Аксёнов встал перед необходимостью создать историческое полотно краха и исхода. Потому что именно он, Аксёнов, может быть, точнее, чем любой другой советский интеллигент, своей жизнью и своим творчеством создал модель советского интеллигента. Василий Аксёнов как зеркало русского либерализма. (Генис, Вайль, 5)

(So Vassily Aksyonov arose before the necessity to create an historic canvas of collapse and exodus. Because it was exactly he, Aksyonov, perhaps more than any other Soviet intellectual, with his life and his creativity, that could create the model of the Soviet intellectual. Vassily Aksyonov functions as the mirror of Russian liberalism.)

## Chapter 3

### “Howl” and the American Beat Generation

The Cold War and its attendant consequences affected the US and its writers and artists in just as profound a way as their counterparts in the USSR. For many, the postwar years were a stifling environment of conformity and burgeoning consumerism that exhibited a frightening return to the pre-war policy of isolationism. The lingering ramifications of the “Red Scare,” the dread specter of the “Red Menace” and the advent of McCarthyism, which reared its ugly head in the postwar years, all loomed large in the collective American consciousness.

Nancy J. Peters states:

After World War II, the United States began to solidify its enlarged role as an imperialist power and to incorporate useful features of fascism: militarization, nationalist ideology, state support of large corporations...and the creation of enemies for purposes of social control. The mass media celebrated common sense, social adjustment, conformity, churchgoing and togetherness. The good life was defined by a house in suburbia, a new car, and synthetic products; the economics of planned obsolescence fanned the flames of market growth. (Peters, 202)

It was a stagnant time across all walks of life, and there wasn't much around to fire the imagination. Things politically, culturally and artistically were reaching a nadir as far as creativity was concerned. In many ways the situation came to a head in 1950 when an obscure Junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, looking to make a name for himself, and seeking to take advantage of the venomous political situation with regards to communism, publicly alleged that

the US State Department was literally crawling with communists and communist sympathizers. McCarthy came to personify the stultifying and inward looking American mainstream political and artistic policy, and he was able for a time to gain a significant amount of influence among the American people in general, and the American government in particular. Sam Roberts elaborates:

With the U.S. locked in a tense Cold War with the Soviet Union, news of McCarthy's accusation against the State Department of President Harry Truman sent shock waves across the nation. It catapulted McCarthy to national prominence overnight, and eventually made his name synonymous with a decade-long period of investigations—labeled "witch hunts" by his critics—to uncover Communist infiltration in American life. (Roberts, 1)

McCarthy's statement produced the desired effect and America was plunged into a dark and dreary time that affected people in all walks of life and of all political stripes. It is important to mention that politically this was the time of the Rosenbergs, the beginnings of nuclear proliferation, and the dawn of the military industrial complex that President Eisenhower had warned so vociferously against. Things were not much better culturally as it was the era of *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Andy Griffith Show* and the family friendly and innocuous beatnik on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. There was not much around that could stimulate the minds of those who lived on the fringes of American society or thirsted for something more or something different. The writers of the Beat Generation helped to fill this artistic void, in conjunction with the jazz age, and the movement eventually blossomed into the much larger cultural, political, societal and artistic

upheavals of the 1960s. This situation informed the cultural backdrop behind the writing of "Howl," and other seminal pieces of Beat literature. In many ways one could argue that if this stifling environment did not exist, then the Beat movement would not have existed either. History has shown that repressive, out of touch governments actually engender artistic proliferation, and this is particularly true of the Beat movement and the Russian "New Wave" movement. The trend has continued and other relevant movements throughout the 20th century including Prague's underground culture movement in the late 1960s, led by the influential psychedelic musical group the Plastic People of the Universe, the punk rock movements in the 1970s in the US and UK, and the hardcore punk movement in the 1980s in the US, all sprung up out of a sense of cultural despondency. All of these movements used music and other art forms to protest against the repressive political realities in their respective countries. These musicians and artists did not feel represented by their societies as a whole. And while the level of politicization within each of these respective movements differs, I contend that a direct link exists between these movements that is borne out and personified by the anti-establishment ethos that each movement possessed.

The aims and intentions of the Beat Generation and their writings were deadly serious, and while it is true that they were not overtly political in tone, the writing was reactionary and anti-establishment in manner and nature. These young writers and poets were seeking to carve out a place for themselves among

the staid and oppressive reality of postwar America. Additionally, they were reacting aggressively against the blatant (and to many, immoral) commercialization and commoditization of virtually everything in American society. Allan Johnston elaborates that the Beat ethos

...involved a desire to escape from socioeconomic conditions that the Beats felt subordinated the person to a world of consumer objects, while also suggesting a broader critique of sociocultural developments that were generating an increasingly totalitarian, commodity-driven world. In the eyes of the Beats, the society they faced was massifying and de-individualizing, while the state, the workplace, the media, and consumer culture appeared to be operating in tandem to require “conformity” at all times and in all places. (Johnston, 107)

This assessment of American society is shockingly in line with the views of many of the Soviet and Eastern Bloc dissidents concerning the direction and policies of their respective governments. It is also important to note that the Beat ethos is reinforced by the extant personal correspondence between the members of the Beat Generation themselves. A veritable treasure trove of these letters has been unearthed and is now seeing the light of day. These letters help to shed light on the situation that these writers and poets found themselves in, and were rebelling against, as well as imparting a detailed look into the innermost thoughts of these future literary giants. Oliver Harris elaborates:

...the value of Beat letters is the product of their position as not just unpublished but *unpublishable* writers: the likes of Ginsberg and Kerouac invested essential energy in correspondence during the early Cold War years, when their social marginality was also economic and cultural. For those undesirables denied voice or place by Cold War discourses, the letter embodied postwar

American dreams of an alternative personal and social space.  
(Harris, 175)

Additionally, these letters are also extremely confessional in tone. Knowing that this correspondence was not meant for publication and was intended only for like-minded and sympathetic individuals, members of the Beat Generation were able to fully express themselves in a highly personal and confessional manner. The declarative style of writing also has parallels with the purveyors of the Russian “New Wave.” Gladilin comments on the phenomenon: “Even without knowledge of contemporary Western literature, confessional prose...did appear. This seemed to me both a coincidence and not a coincidence...[It] just so happened that the interest of our young people was mainly in the confessional” (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 125). James Breslin backs up this assertion stating Ginsburg’s “early work does fuse two modes – the confessional and the visionary – that were to become important in the sixties” (Breslin, 84). The writers of the Beat Generation and the Russian “New Wave” lived on the edge of their respective societies in every sense of the word. And because there was no place for them in mainstream American or Soviet society, the artists of these movements decided to carve out their own place, based on their own set of rules, their own sense of right and wrong and their own sense of growing moral outrage. The fact that both sets of artists arrived at this same literary mode, apart from and independent of each other, is another example of the simultaneity

of these movements and acts as further proof that indeed something was ‘simply in the air’ as Gladilin, perhaps rather flippantly supposed.

The first lines of “Howl” have entered into American lexical history and state the intent of the piece in no uncertain terms:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn  
looking for an angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection  
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,  
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking  
in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating  
across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,  
who bared their brains to Heaven... (9)

These lines are infused with hope, longing, madness, desperation and a yearning for truth in an effort to make sense of postwar reality and the modern world. The groundbreaking poem helped to define the modern, confessional mode of expression, and serves as a complete and utter refutation of the typical American consumerist worldview. In many ways the poem functions as one of the first shots of the coming culture war across the bow of the staid and stagnant backdrop of 1950s America. More importantly the poem was crucial in “declaring and creating an alternative literary and cultural community” (Shinder, xxiii).

Robert Polito reports that ““Howl” aims to create a community, a society, a new nation” (Polito 231). The overall impact of the poem cannot be argued and its influence reaches far and wide, across oceans, walls and Iron Curtains. Eliot Katz contends that ““what has resonated most in the minds and imaginations of

readers across the planet for half a century has been the keen sense that here is a poet devoting considerable literary skills and talents to help envision and create a more humane world” (Katz, 183). With “Howl,” Ginsberg was embarking on journey, not just to change the face of poetry, but, additionally and more importantly, to change the very face of the world itself. The writing, performance and publication of the poem, was his attempt to impart a comprehensive “NO!” to the powers that be. Ginsberg let it be known in no uncertain terms that the current state of affairs, be they cultural, political or artistic, were patently unacceptable and were actively working against the better nature of human beings and against the overall progress of society. In this regard, “Howl” acted as a work of affirmation and a rallying call for all like-minded individuals to resist mainstream, postwar American ideals, and to demand something better, including a cessation of the Cold War and its attendant imagery. The trajectory of “Howl” later continues in a similar vein, addressing the legitimate concerns of the politically astute:

...who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism,  
who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square  
weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos  
wailed them down...(11)

This section too is extremely relevant and these few short lines are loaded with significance for the discussion at hand. These lines indicate that mainstream America is being lulled to sleep by the incessant ‘haze’ of advertising and the

burgeoning consumerist tendencies of postwar America. It alludes to the fact that the truth about the Cold War, and the reasons behind it, are being kept from the public at large. The poem puts forth the idea that those that are actually concerned with the nuclear testing at Los Alamos and the proliferation of nuclear warheads in general are perceived as nothing but crazy or Communist sympathizers by the media and the US government. The words 'weeping' and 'undressing' also call forth the image of the Holy Fool in the Russian tradition, as well as the image of Yaroslavna's heartfelt lament from the medieval Kievan Rus' tale, "The Lay of Igor's Campaign." When all of these elements are put together and analyzed from a historical, literary and Cold War perspective, the aims of the poem become clear. With "Howl", Ginsberg managed to provide a voice to a section of society that had been long neglected by the powers that be, as well as putting forth strong concerns over the direction of the postwar world by calling attention to the overall failings of mainstream American society.

Ginsburg himself was no stranger to Russian literature and it is interesting to note that he was of Russian descent on his mother's side. He has gone on the record as being an ardent fan of Dostoevsky, (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 27) and as the 1960's progressed he became increasingly aware of many writers involved in the Russian "New Wave" movement. In fact Ginsburg met Aksyonov in Moscow in 1965 and later developed a close working relationship with "New Wave" poet Andrei Voznesensky. The two poetical giants of their respective schools became

fast friends and used to do readings together, as well as translate each other's work (Lauridsen, Dalgard 25). In the same interview with Lauridsen and Dalgard taken in 1983, the beatnik poet declared "I'm basically a Russian poet, put in an American scene (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 28). Ginsberg strongly identified with the Russian literary tradition and the country's love of the oral tradition. It is also interesting to note that other Beat writers eventually made their way into print in the USSR in the 1960s, including Kerouac. Maurice Friedberg explains:

A number of new Western books of no special political interest also were translated into Russian. Most important among these were three tales from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*... The world they described must have charmed Soviet readers with its exoticism – a world of jazz, of carefree travel, of odd jobs, of dignified Mexicans and silly gringos. It was truly literature from the New World. (Friedberg, 103-104)

These stories and other Beat literature that was able to traverse the Iron Curtain acted as much more than influence, it served as positive proof that the writers of the Russian "New Wave" had come across the path to spiritual enlightenment, much like the Beats had. In many ways it also functioned as affirmation that they had indeed tapped into some sort of universal consciousness that was able to overcome ideological, cultural and geographical boundaries and lead its adherents to search for collective truth.

The music of choice for the Beats and their ilk was undoubtedly jazz, and specifically the hard-edged rhythms of the variant that came to be known as "Bop," played by such luminaries as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. The

music pulses, pushes and has a hard, rhythmic swing to it that much of mainstream America at the time found unpalatable. The rhythm and cadence of jazz infected the rhythm and cadence of the emerging poetry and prose of the Beats. But the influence went further than this. Preston Whaley Jr. elaborates:

Jazz's impact was aesthetic and social. Its improvisational and pluralistic bent compelled the Beats to open their art to immediate expression and diverse voices in culture. New voices became salient features of Beat texts, socially marked by the motley community of artists and their audiences in the Bay Area and other cities in the country. These artists and publics converted disaffection and powerlessness into affirmative emotions that shifted the marginal into the center, the disdained into the celebrated, the beat into beatitude...It was about creating a new art and a new earth. (Whaley, Jr., 6)

Jazz adherents in the USSR were also becoming disaffected with the now tame sounding and state approved style of jazz known as "swing" and embraced the same new musical rhythms. In his excellent and comprehensive book about jazz in the Soviet Union S. Frederick Starr explains:

Jazz, with its emphasis on individuality and personal expression, became the lingua franca of dissident Soviet youth, the argot of jazz their verbal medium. But not just any jazz. The carefully scored and smoothly synchronized swing bands had succumbed to banal and hollow cheerfulness. By contrast, the emerging Bop movement provided Soviet youth with an authentic language, one that permitted real feelings to break through. (Starr, 242)

The deliberate step away from the more socially acceptable swing music helped to further alienate the Stilyagi and other true jazz enthusiasts in the USSR. But the Stilyagi were nonplussed about this to say the least. Again Starr tells us:

By zeroing in on the new bop music, Soviet stiliagi discovered exactly what the American Beat writers found, namely the private and uniquely modern ecstasy of social alienation and inner freedom” and that “...the jazz subculture of the USSR...turned away from the larger public. (Starr, 243)

This fact helped to line up the respective movements to an even larger degree, as well as serving to alienate them from the ideals and mores of mainstream society. When taken together the elements of jazz, style, confessional convention in literature, and societal alienation all coalesced in a manner that uniquely informed the output of the Russian “New Wave” and the Beat Generation. The distinctive confluence created a worldwide scene of like-minded individuals all striving to break free of societal constraints and governmental repression in an effort to transcend the mundane reality of mainstream postwar existence. “Howl” specifically helped to create and influence the collective literary movement that worked in close conjunction with jazz and other art forms in the attempt to move towards a humane and diverse new world. This new world would cater to all, regardless of color, creed, politics or station and not just those who lived within the parameters and constraints of mainstream society.

## Chapter 4

### The Verbal Gymnastics Employed by the Russian “New Wave” and the Beat Generation

The “New Wave” of Russian literature had more in common with the Beat movement than just a love of jazz, anti-establishment behavior, and a life lived in constant movement. Aksyonov employed many devices and literary motifs that would not seem out of place in the work of Ginsberg or Kerouac. Aksyonov’s book also has an almost confessional tone to it, yet another attribute that the text shares with the Beats. The work of Aksyonov and Kerouac in particular, also reveals many thematic similarities, such as debauchery and physical movement that serve to further bind the two movements together. Both factions utilized a Dionysian approach to life, and employed devices such as the grotesque, stream-of-consciousness, Billingsgate, or vulgar language, the carnivalesque as outlined by Mikhail Bahktin, and other hallucinatory elements to great effect in their works. Aksyonov employs these devices in an attempt to transcend the mundane reality of life under a totalitarian regime, as well to highlight the attendant absurdities encountered in daily life under such a regime. The scenes in *The Burn* depicting alcohol abuse also fit nicely into the dynamic of highlighting these realities. Cynthia Simmons elaborates in her book *Their Fathers’ Voice*:

In *The Burn*, Aksyonov employs certain (often carnivalesque) devices and motifs...elements of the picaresque, transitional locales, chronological or psychological adolescence. However... it

is the grotesque that functions as the primary vehicle for the escape from and, possibly, destruction of, one reality and the quest for and creation of an alternate one (Simmons, 43).

The phenomenon is reflected in the readers' first introduction to the saxophone playing Samson Apollinarievich Sabler early in *The Burn*. The jazzman is preparing to return to play at the local nightclub in Moscow where he first made his name as a youth. As he is getting ready to leave, Sabler engages in a hallucinatory conversation with his beloved saxophone. The long ignored instrument and ultimate arbiter of cool is summarily castigating the musician for neglecting him (25). In order to both get himself moving and to instill courage for the upcoming gig, Sabler decides to have a (rather generously sized) drink.

Aksyonov describes the scene beautifully:

«Белая лошадь» толчками продвигалась по кровотоку, глухо стучало сердце, предметы привычно менялись, теряли свой непонятный устрашающий смысл, приближались и сладко тревожили, как в юности. Дух юности, вечер ожиданий – вот первые подарки алкоголя. (23)

(The drink pulsated through my bloodstream, my heart beat with a muffled thump, objects changed their usual form and lost their frightening, mysterious significance, came closer, and created the delicious feeling of anxiety that you get when you're young. The spirit of youth, an evening of expectations – those are the first gifts of alcohol.) [Glenny, 25]

The introduction to our debauched hero is an important one that helps to set the scene for what is to come, both stylistically and culturally, as well as serving as a link between Aksyonov's work and that of the Beats. For Sabler, the possibilities of youth and the promise of alcohol, creativity, adventure, and the pulse of the

very night itself, all show the new potential that was now achievable in the postwar Soviet Union. Another important aspect of Aksyonov's introduction to Sabler is the style and language that he employs. The tone is almost playful in nature, but it is also tinged with a tangible desperation to live, to experience, and to find salvation. Sabler is relishing the reality that he is simply alive and this fact is borne out by the language and imagery Aksyonov employs. If this passage were to be taken out of context, many would find it hard to believe that this section depicts a character living under the auspices of a stagnating and declining totalitarian regime during the Cold War.

Additionally, Aksyonov found the use of elements of the grotesque to be fundamental to his work. This is especially true of his work around this period.

Asya Kupriyanova contends that:

В аксёновской прозе конца шестидесятых годов карнавальная стратегия абсурдности и гротеска набирает всё большую силу. Для героев становится характерным антиповедение – нарушение порядка вещей. В...«Ожог» писатель активно использует принцип гротеска, в частности гротескного тела...Цель карнавала – достижение избытка бытия. Этим объясняется большое количество пиршественных образов. Аксёнов воспроизводит основную антиномию европейской культуры с древних времён до наших дней: аполоническое и дионисическое как две стороны одного явления, первоисточники искусства. Герой Аксёнова, творческий человек, пребывает в экстатическом состоянии, для него характерен энтузиазм, вдохновение. (Куприянова, 16-17)

(In Aksyonov's prose at the end of the sixties, the carnival strategy of the absurd and the grotesque is gaining even more strength. For the characters, anti-behavior is becoming characteristic, and is violating the order of things. In *The Burn*, the writer actively uses

the principle of the grotesque, and in particular grotesqueness of the body. The objective of the carnival is the attainment of excess in life. This explains the large quantity of banquet images. Aksyonov reproduces the basic antinomy of European culture from ancient times up to our day. The Apollonian and the Dionysian are like two sides of one phenomenon, culminating in the origin of art. Aksyonov's hero, an artistic person, resides in an ecstatic state, for him enthusiasm and inspiration are characteristic.)

The writer himself readily acknowledges these guiding principles and has even gone on the record specifically about this feature, stating, "Without the grotesque, I just can't work" (Lauridsen, Dalgard, 24). There are numerous examples of its usage in *The Burn* that tend to revolve around the twin "safety valves" of alcohol and sex. In addition to the grotesque, Aksyonov also employed use of the carnivalesque as posited by Bahktin.<sup>4</sup> Ilya Popov states that:

Кроме того, спецификой «западного» подхода к творчеству В. Аксёнова было исследование его в свете учения М. Бахтина о роли карнавальности в культуре Средневековья и Возрождения. (Попов, 3)

(In addition to the specific character of the "Western" approach of V. Aksyonov to creativity, he was studying it the light of the teaching of M. Bahktin concerning the role of the carnival in the culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.)

Aksyonov's combination of Western ideas and modes of expression with his own unique Russian style, in conjunction with grotesque and carnivalesque attributes, helped him to create a rich linguistic and cultural tapestry that was in turn able to transcend the sum of its parts. As a consequence of this combination, he and

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Bahktin and the carnivalesque see his *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press, 1984.

other writers of the Russian “New Wave” became the influential and well-respected writers that they are today.

The style and language Aksyonov employed is palpably connected to the style and language utilized by the Beats in their writings. It depicts many similar feelings, emotions and yearnings also commented upon by Ginsburg, Kerouac and others of the Beat Generation. A good example of this confluence, which is similar in tone and presentation to the segment concerning Sabler above, is present in *Desolation Angels* (1965) by Jack Kerouac. While stationed on a desolate peak in the Pacific Northwest on fire watch duty, the narrator muses on what he will do when he returns to the free and inspiring environs of San Francisco and to its burgeoning underground culture:

“I’d buy a great big quart of Christian Brothers port or some other excellent special brand...and take off, around the little street of Chinatown...I’d wander around, stand on the corner of Italian Broadway too, to get the feel of life...Wine finished, I go singing an handclapping quietly to the beat of my feet all the way up Kearney back to Chinatown...---then done, I either go to bed or to our bar, The Place, to find the gang and get drunk...” (28-29)

The selection too, is about the unmitigated joys that can be found in life. The narrator is also full of youthful enthusiasm and the belief that anything is possible (especially at night.) He is thoroughly unconcerned with the political situation in America or the ongoing ravages and absurdities of McCarthyism and the Cold War. Our protagonist simply wants to wander the night searching for kicks with a bottle of wine and to tend the fire burning in his belly. The Apollinariéviches

share this exact same attitude to life; the most important thing is simply to experience, to live, to search out life in the night and to grab it by the throat and give it a good shake. In this worldview, youth and exuberance have the ability to trump ideology, political reality and meaningless sloganeering, and to act as a gateway to an exciting new world outside the jurisdiction of the powers that be.

A seminal piece of Beat literature, "Howl" utilizes a similar sense of verbal gymnastics that can be seen in the writing of Aksyonov. The piece uses and abuses aspects of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and Billingsgate, among others in a sort of Dionysian bacchanal. All of these forms and devices are present in Aksyonov's work. In many ways the poem acted as a safety valve for Ginsberg, stuck in the repressive and stagnating times of 1950s America, much like the carnival acted as a release valve in medieval times. "Howl" was a sea change, both for Ginsberg personally and for Beat poetry in general. It became highly influential and it is important to note that the poem functions in a highly confessional style that is also prevalent in Kerouac and Aksyonov. Also like Aksyonov, Ginsberg seems to be fascinated with the concepts of the "high" and the "low" with regards to culture. He continually references lofty concepts and the best of human attributes and juxtaposes them with coarse colloquialisms and foul language. This dichotomy is effective because it encapsulates the very essence of the human experience. Both Ginsberg and Aksyonov, as representatives of their collective movements, teeter between the concepts of

beauty and beatification and self-abuse and self-destruction in their quest for a universal truth.

The notion of the “high” and the “low” is an important component of Aksyonov’s writing as is evident from the many grotesque and carnivalesque scenes which take place in *The Burn*. It acts as yet another link to the writers of the Beat generation, and their propensity for using the grotesque in an effort to point out the absurdity in day-to-day reality. T. Novikova acknowledges the importance of the high/low dichotomy as well as Aksyonov’s use of intertextuality in *The Burn*:

Интертекстуальность Аксёнова охватывает множество аллюзий на современную массовую культуру как русского, так и западного происхождения. Причем образы «низкой» культуры органично сочетаются с образами «высокой».... Характеристика эта очень точна: в контексте аксёновской прозы образы классиков и носителей массовой культуры Востока и Запада вступают в сложный полифонический диалог, отрицая само представление об их противостоянии. (Новикова, 1-2)

(The intertextuality of Aksyonov involves a multitude of illusions on modern popular culture of both Russian and Western origin. And forms of “low” culture organically combine with forms of “high” culture. The characteristics of this are very precise: in the context of Aksyonov’s prose, forms of classic and native popular culture of the East and West enter into a complicated polyphonic dialog, denying the very notion of their opposition.)

In many ways Russian “New Wave” poet Andrei Voznesensky acts as link between the prose of Aksyonov and the poetry of Ginsberg. His work contains many of the components of the above writers, including cultural and linguistic

features that serve to further strengthen the bonds between the movements. He later became a close friend of Ginsberg and traveled extensively with the American, giving readings all across the world. The similarities between his work and Akseyonov and Ginsberg is readily apparent as a selection from his poem «Отступление в ритме рок-н-ролла» (Deviation in the Rhythm of Rock 'N' Roll) demonstrates:

Рок-		
н-		
	ролл —	
		об стену сандалиии!
Ром		
	в рот —	
		лица как неон.
Ревет		
		музыка скандальная,
Труба		
		пляшет, как питон!
В тупик		
		врезаются машины.
Двух		
	всмятку	
		"Хау ду ю ду?"
Туз		
	пик	
		негритос в манишке,
Дуй,		
	дуй	
		в страшную трубу!...

(Rock 'n' roll – see the sandals kick!  
Down the drinks – face a neon-sign.  
Roars the music, scandalously rocks,  
Prances the trumpet, pythoness-like!  
Step on the gas – dead ended you go,  
Two cars crash – like it or lump it.  
Ace of spades – a white-dickeyed Negro,

Blow, man, blow that terrible trumpet!...) [Marshall, 77]

The poem is all about the dynamics of life lived during the heady times of the jazz age in the Soviet Union. It functions as a call to arms to live and experience the hedonistic joys of life, no matter the political reality. The language is insistent and urgent, much like the music and nightlife that it depicts. Terms such as “roars,” “dances,” “crash” and “blow” and phrases depicting car crashes, undesirable elements and sweaty jazz clubs evoke the language and scenes employed by Aksyonov and Ginsberg. To be involved in such things under the existent political realities of the Cold War and under the auspices of a totalitarian regime is an all or nothing proposition. The difference between the salvation that music and literature can provide, as well as the risks involved in indulging in this forbidden lifestyle screams out from the page. This attribute is characteristic of much of the writing from both the “New Wave” and Beat schools, as the titles “Howl” and *The Burn* more than readily suggest.

Culturally, literarily, linguistically, stylistically and politically, the writers of the Russian “New Wave” and the Beat generation broke new ground and forged new frontiers. The sheer scale of their literary output, as well as their very lifestyles themselves, flew in the face of social convention and forced the authorities of their respective countries to sit up and take notice. (This was rarely a good thing by the way.) By employing disparate styles and artistic methods such as those mentioned above, these writers were able to concoct a strong and

resilient new literary tradition that confounded authorities and that has stood the test of time for decades. The strong voice of dissent and anti-establishmentarianism, combined with moral outrage and the use of unique literary devices that is inherent in these works was also transmitted to forthcoming generations. The distinction is an important one, which in turn helped to inform and inspire future youth and culture movements on both sides of the of the Iron Curtain.

## Chapter 5

### The Stilyagi Movement and Counterculture in the Soviet Union

It may come as a surprise to many that the vibrant anti-establishment movement in youth culture, that came to be known as the Stilyagi (стиляги, or “stylish ones”) movement, began to blossom during the reign of Stalin. The Red Tsar himself was aware of the movement and took steps to eradicate it through the usual channels of repression, both through the apparatus of state security and through the media. It is important to note that the Stilyagi did not name themselves; the Soviet press foisted the name on them. In fact, they preferred a different name. Gargolina and Cherkasov elaborate:

«Стиляга» - это не самоназвание; сами себя эти молодые люди либо никак не называли, либо именовались «штатниками» (то есть горячие поклонники Соединённых Штатов. (Гарголина, Черкасов, 29)

(“Hipster, this wasn’t a self-designation. These young people never referred to themselves this way, but called themselves “Shtatniki.” (That is ardent admirers of the United States.)

The Stilyagi movement was a direct and pointed response to the repressive cultural attitudes of the Soviet system. They were a completely self-contained entity that managed to make up for a lack of natural fashion and music related resources with ingenious solutions as regards the perennial problem of lack of supply. These intrepid souls simply made what they could not find in the state run stores. And this amounted to practically everything necessary to be a

Stilyaga, from ties to jackets, from shoes to the very music itself. The famed Russian music critic Artemy Troitsky gives a detailed account of how the Stilyagi were able to manufacture their own recordings of forbidden jazz records:

The demand for pop and jazz recordings at the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties was already enormous, while records and tape recorders were in catastrophically short supply. This led to the birth of a legendary phenomenon – the memorable records ‘on ribs’... These were actual X-ray plates...rounded at the edges with scissors, with a small hole in the centre and grooves that were barely visible on the surface...X-ray plates were the cheapest and most readily available source of necessary plastic. People bought them by the hundreds from hospitals and clinics for kopeks, after which grooves were cut with the help of special machines (made, they say, from old phonographs by skilled conspiratorial hands.) (Troitsky, 19)

The ingenious process, known as *magnitizdat*, was one of the only ways that many diehard Soviet jazz fans were able to hear, and pass on to other enthusiasts, this most rare of forbidden Western fruit. (Later during the fledgling rock years, the process was carried out on rickety and extremely illegal reel-to-reel tape machines. Troitsky states: “Imperceptibly there developed an underground industry and a ‘black market’ – tape recordings of an LP cost three roubles, while the album itself would fetch 20 or 30 roubles”) [Troitsky, 25]. The process acted as a lifeline to the many Stilyagi desperate to actually hear the new sounds emerging from the West. It goes without saying that jazz was not popular among the Soviet regime and this process was highly illegal. The mere possession of unauthorized records, let alone the equipment needed to duplicate them was enough to land the offender in the GULAG, or in internal exile. The KGB and

other government organizations employed many methods; both fair and foul, to suppress this Western musical 'abomination.' Noted Czech author Josef Škvorecký himself was a young adherent of jazz in Czechoslovakia, both during the Nazi occupation and in the period after World War II, when the country fell under the sway of Soviet rule. In his book *Talkin' Moscow Blues*, he makes several insights into life under both totalitarian regimes. Škvorecký notes that the Nazi attitude to jazz was very much similar to the stance taken by the Soviets. The Nazis characterized jazz as "Judeo-Negroid music" and did everything in their power to suppress this music. They even published a ten-point set of regulations restricting such things as rhythm, tempo, key and style of lyric, among other things in an effort to suppress the jazz phenomenon. These statutes were later upheld and expounded upon by the new Soviet taskmasters (Škvorecký, 85-87). Later Škvorecký gives an even more succinct portrayal of the Soviet take on jazz music:

They characterized jazz and jazz-inspired music by a rich assortment of derogatory adjectives: "perverted," "decadent," "base," "lying," "degenerate," etc. They compared the music to "the moaning in the throat of a camel" and "the hiccupping of a drunk," and although it was "the music of cannibals," it was at the same time invented by the capitalists "to deafen the ears of the Marshallized world by means of epileptic, loud-mouthed compositions. (Škvorecký, 91)

The demonization of Western music forms would continue well into the next few decades. As rock 'n' roll began to infiltrate beyond the Iron Curtain, the response from the Soviet authorities was just as reactionary and repressive, if not more so.

The fact that rock 'n' roll carried on the tradition of jazz and the Stilyagi, and acted as a rallying point for disaffected youth to gather around is indisputable. In his history of rock music in the USSR, Troitsky explains:

В это же время рок оказался в фокусе молодёжного движения протеста, став его культурным символом и рупором. Музыкальное новаторство и радикальные идеи рок-артистов породили феномен «подпольного рока» (андеграунда) – некоммерческого направления, фактически порывающего с развлекательными канонами популярной музыки, частью которой рок до тех пор являлся. (Троицкий, 8)

(At the same time, rock proved to be the focus of the youth movement of protest, in turn becoming a cultural symbol and a mouthpiece. Musical innovation and the radical ideas of rock artists engendered the phenomenon of “underground rock,” a non-commercial school, virtually breaking with the entertainment principle of popular music, which in many ways rock was always meant to be.)

The Stilyagi manufactured their own clothes in much the same fashion as they manufactured their records. Due to this fact they were able to control exactly how they portrayed themselves, down to the finest detail. In his article, “In Praise of Vulgarly,” Charles Paul Freund gives a concise description of the history and origins of this movement:

Some extraordinary and totally unexpected figures appeared on the streets of Moscow in 1949 and in other major cities of the Soviet Bloc soon afterward. They wore jackets with huge, padded shoulders and pants with narrow legs. They were clean-shaven, but they let their hair grow long, covered it with grease, and flipped it up at the back. They sported unusually colorful ties, which they let hang well below their belts. What their fellow Muscovites most noticed about them, for some reason, were their shoes, which were oversized, with thick soles. There were some women in the movement as well, notable for their short, tight skirts and very

heavy lipstick. Although they were Russians, they called each other by such names as "Bob" and "Joe." In Moscow, they referred to their hangout, Gorki Prospekt, as "Broadway." They chewed gum, they affected an odd walk that involved stretching their necks as they went down the street, and they loved to listen to American jazz. These young men were to become known in Russian as stilyagi, a term that is usually translated as "style hunters"... What they had turned themselves into were walking cultural protests against Stalinism in one of its most paranoid periods. (Freund, 4)

Again, it cannot be stressed heavily enough the risks and tribulations that these Western leaning style merchants subjected themselves to. The Stilyagi were an open sore on the skin of socialism and their very presence was a form of strong rebellion against the status quo. Nevertheless, these trailblazers continued to thrive and multiply. The critic Troitsky's portrayal of the Stilyagi is more succinct, and more loaded in terms of terminology: "Stilyagi were a scandalous, outrageous youth cult of the 1950s – the first hipsters, the first devotees of exotic music, the first advocates of an alternative style" (Troitsky, 13). The use of the term 'cult' is extremely interesting in this context. It carries religious connotations, as personified by the quest for truth and salvation in the writing of Aksyonov and Ginsberg. Additionally the term calls forth "the Cult of Personality" which surrounded Stalin and his reign during this time. In many ways, the Stilyagi movement, the literature written by and about them, and the music that they listened to, all coalesced into a new spirituality, a new church as it were, with its own rituals, language and art. It is no wonder then, that this movement infuriated and frightened the Soviet authorities.

It goes without saying that the Stilyagi movement openly thumbed its collective nose at Soviet political and social conventions. As a consequence of this and other (perceived) transgressions, its adherents were often made to pay a heavy price for membership. The Stilyagi were routinely roused by the KGB and the Komsomol (Young Communists League), as well as often being subjected to arrest simply for their attitudes and attire. Stilyagi dances were thoroughly secret affairs, often held in out of the way locations, and only known to those within the movement. Nonetheless these events were often raided with an almost militaristic efficiency. The life of the Stilyagi was a precarious existence and not always a happy one. Again Freund tells us:

It wasn't only the authorities with whom the Stilyagi had to contend; it was everyone. Being a Stilyaga was truly isolating, and the public reaction was brutal. Their fellow Muscovites taunted them on the sidewalks and on the streetcars, loudly criticizing their appearance, hurling insults at them, sometimes attacking them. Obviously, the Communist press took notice of them, terming them subversive and linking them to criminal elements. Inevitably, the police also went after them. When the cops didn't arrest them, they gave the Stilyagi impromptu street haircuts or, interestingly, slashed their clothes. (Freund, 4)

In the gray and turbulent age of Stalinism, to dare to be different, and to openly embrace not only colorful Western dress sensibilities, but also even (gasp!) the universally dreaded jazz music, was to effectively mark yourself as an undesirable element and as a potential 'enemy of the people.' The consequences for many in the Stilyagi movement, as well as the jazz musicians they flocked in great numbers to see perform was dire. Exile and imprisonment

in the GULAG was not an uncommon punishment for these adherents of jazz during the waning years of Stalin's reign.

To a large extent these persistent exiles and recriminations only came to an end once Khrushchev's Thaw began to take effect in the mid-to-late 50s. However, another event helped to alleviate the daily struggles of the Stilyagi and the other purveyors of cool. Troitsky elaborates:

The breakthrough...was the Seventh International Festival of Youth And Students, which staggered the capital in the summer of 1957. Thousands of real live young foreigners flooded into virginal Moscow. Among them were jazz musicians, beatnik poets, and modern artists... (Troitsky, 18)

The festival was a watershed moment in the (temporary) loosening of state control. It gave the people a hope that things really were changing for the better and that the horrors, repressions and purges of the Stalin era were truly gone, never to return. Perhaps the most celebrated and popular poet of the "New Wave" movement Yevgeny Yevtushenko, was in Moscow at time of the conference and gives his thoughts as to the importance of this monumental historical event in his autobiography:

Now the fog was beginning to dissipate. Tens of thousands of foreign tourists were coming to us, and tens of thousands of our tourists were going abroad. The Moscow Youth Festival, when young people of every color and from every country flooded the streets, had tremendous importance. In it I saw a blueprint of the future. (Yevtushenko, 115)

As a result of this conference, restrictions on youth and youth culture began to be loosened (though sadly only for a short time.) After these groundbreaking

cultural events life marginally improved for the Stilyagi and they were able to exist without the constant fear of arrest, or of other societal and political reprisals.

However, it should be stressed that even before the conference all was not doom and gloom. From the interview with Lauridsen and Dalgard, Aksyonov gleefully recounted the youthful exhortations and happenings that commonly occurred in artistic circles during this time:

In my student years, our crowd was such that if we had known the phrase “Beat Generation” existed, we would have called ourselves the “Beat Generation” – but we considered ourselves to be the successors of the Russian Futurists. We lived absolutely like beatniks, with all the elements of beatnik life which they had in San Francisco. We went round in torn clothes, listened to jazz, we lived in a commune, we painted abstract pictures, we had this notebook, where we wrote all kinds of hooliganish poems, we drank, danced the “boogie-woogie,” and the girls used to come to us, creeping into the commune through the window. It was all together amazing...(Lauridsen, Dalgard, 53)

The recollection is fascinating and serves to further strengthen the bonds between the Beat movement and the “New Wave” of Russian literature, and to exacerbate the seemingly unlikely simultaneity between the two movements. Unfortunately, however these new found freedoms were not to last for very long. Member of the Russian “New Wave” Anatoly Gladilin notes that “In the Course of a few months, beginning December 1, 1962, Khrushchev literally trampled underfoot everything new that had appeared in Soviet painting, cinema and literature” (Gladilin, 115). In the eyes of many hard-line Communists, Khrushchev had over stepped his bounds in the attempt to liberalize Soviet

culture, and repair some of the damage done during the Stalin era. The rolling back of many of the liberties granted during de-Stalinization hit the artistic and cultural worlds hard. The demise of Khrushchev shortly after these rollbacks in 1964 ushered in the much more conservative Leonid Brezhnev, and the period of stagnation as depicted and lamented in *The Burn* began in earnest.

And while it is true that the Stilyagi movement, like the Beat movement was not overtly or explicitly political in tone, it was a form of civil protest, a form of anti-establishment behavior that tacitly rebelled against the very core set of proper, traditional Soviet values. And in the Soviet context, this form of protest was more than enough. Georgii Litvinov elaborates:

Но стилиажничество стало для многих школой стиля в одежде и музыке, помогло понять, что такое свобода в далеко не свободном обществе. Да, стилиаги не создали чего-то своего, оригинального, но уже сам их «культурный протест» против господствующей серости и идеологических штампов заслуживает уважения. Кроме того, стилиажничество стало хорошей питательной средой для многих будущих писателей, художников, музыкантов. (Литвинов, 270)

(But for many the quality of stylishness become a school of style in clothing and music and helped them to understand that such freedom by itself is far from meaning a free society overall. Yes, the hipsters didn't create anything original of their own, but when viewed today, their cultural protest against the prevailing dullness and ideological clichés is worthy of respect. Additionally the quality of stylishness became a good breeding ground for many future writers, artists and musicians.)

It is important to keep in mind that the Stilyagi movement was the first of its kind in Soviet Russia, and as such carried a significant amount of influence across all

walks of artistic and cultural life. When coupled with jazz music and other forms of artistic expression, this counterculture exploded into a significant cultural form and carried much more social relevance and cultural weight than the actual numbers that the movement possessed might have initially suggested. This in turn helped to influence future generations of Soviet cultural dissidents, and under Brezhnev and later, under the more liberal Gorbachev, a significant rock 'n' roll and punk rock scene developed to carry on what the Stilyagi had strived, against virtually insurmountable, odds to create.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions and Final Remarks

With the benefit of hindsight we are able to definitively conclude that the postwar years in the US and USSR consisted of a tumultuous coming of age for writers, musicians and artists of all stripes (to say nothing of ordinary citizens without the wherewithal or gumption to actively stand up or protest for themselves.) Mainstream examples of American culture and society depicted a world and a reality that simply did not exist for many people, and that left much to be desired across all levels of the existing social order. Under the surface of the *Leave it to Beaver's*, Pat Boone's, and other state approved social and political media, a vibrant, expressive and significant underground movement was just waiting to burst forth in an effort to shake the nuclear families of America out of their comfortable, isolationist malaise. The same could be said of the postwar years in the USSR, as culture and artistic expression progressed considerably after the death of Stalin in 1953, in spite of official doctrine. As a consequence of the advance into Germany during World War II, many Soviet soldiers caught an unforgettable glimpse of life in the West. Even though Germany was by this time war ravaged and on the brink of collapse, the Soviets were shown a standard of living that was beyond their comprehension in terms of wealth, infrastructure and abundance. Additionally the conquerors of Berlin were exposed to modes of culture, art, music and literature that were, until then expressly forbidden to them.

These new found freedoms were something that they would not be able forget or forego, despite the best attempts of the Soviet authorities. Soviet soldiers brought home artifacts from their exploits in the West, including literature, art and music that would play a large role in shaping and influencing the coming Stilyagi movement. More importantly than these artifacts, however was the fact that the returning Soviet soldiers brought back Western influenced ideas with them. The Soviet authorities did their best to suppress these ideas, up to and including sending the returning soldiers to camps in Siberia and elsewhere due to the sheer fact that they had been exposed to Western modes of life. However, this did little to dissuade them and Western ideas, music and art continued to take root and flourish, especially among the youth.

The horrors of war had instilled a newfound passion for life on both sides of the world, and sloganeering, petty ideology and the hollow promise of a better life began to have an empty ring to them. This fact is borne out by the lust for life that characters from both the “New Wave” and Beat schools projected and personified. The sentiment was felt across all levels of American and Soviet society, and even Khrushchev himself was briefly caught up in the headiness of the times after he ascended to power following the death of Stalin. However, after a brief time, the relatively liberal era of de-Stalinization gave way to a return to a more traditional, hard-line stance regarding the arts and culture in the USSR in general. The regression and restoration of traditional, Soviet societal norms

led to a crackdown on the arts and a return to antagonistic methods and imprisonment for those not willing to tow the party line. Something akin to this occurred in the US as well, and was personified by the return to prewar isolationist policies, the advent of McCarthyism, and the stultifying nature of mainstream art and entertainment. And while Starr characterizes the Soviet hostilities against jazz as “the purge that failed” (Starr, 157), it is important to keep in mind the fate of many Soviet jazzmen and adherents of the Stilyagi lifestyle. As Škvorecký relates:

Essentially they are all tragic lives...[that] range from death in the Gulag to the frustrated cynicism of old pioneers who have had too many ups and downs, or have made too many degrading compromises not to feel exhausted, and often disgusted, even disgusted with themselves. (Škvorecký, 107)

The political reality of living under a totalitarian regime affected virtually everyone not connected in some way to those placed in a position of power within the government. People from all political, social and artistic walks of life were forced to make concessions and choices against their better nature or interests in an effort to survive under such circumstances. Those that attempted to transcend these realities, or to circumvent them entirely, often paid a terrible price. And while for the most part the situation for those living in the US was not as dire, it is important to keep in mind that the authorities kept a close watch on those in fringe cultures, looking to identify, exploit and root them out at every turn. The Director of the FBI at this time, J. Edgar Hoover had to be much more subtle

about his persecutions than his Soviet counterparts. However, it is now known that he kept extensive files on members of groups that he deemed to be suspicious or without merit to the American people. He would harass and cajole these “subversives,” labeling them as homosexuals, communists and drug addicts, in an effort to subvert the message these artists and musicians were putting forth. He was largely successful in this regard, and through his efforts and influence much of mainstream America simply ignored, abhorred or detested the Beat Generation and jazz music in general.

In many ways, the political, social and artistic realities produced by the Cold War and its consequences acted as a catalyst for the musical, literary and cultural explosion that occurred on both sides of the Iron Curtain. It has been well documented that during times of political uncertainty and unrest, artistic urges come to the fore, often in the form of protest or dissent, and this is quintessentially the case with respect to both the Russian “New Wave” movement and the Beat Generation. Living under the specter of complete and utter nuclear annihilation acted as a vehicle for a new form of artistic freedom and expression to evolve that would be difficult, if not impossible to replicate during more stable, peaceful times. Throughout history other cultural movements have also acted out in protest against repressive or exclusive regimes. These include the so-called ‘hippie’ and anti-Vietnam movements of the 60s, the punk rock movement of the 70s and the hardcore punk movement of the 80s. All of these

movements were reactionary and anti-establishment in nature, and were directly responding to a specific set of topical grievances, be they political, economical or cultural. The music and culture, which surrounded these actions, played a significant role in the trajectory of the respective movements. Additionally, they all portrayed and personified an inherent dissatisfaction with the status quo and all that it represented. When taken at face value each of these movements, including the Beat Generation and the Russian “New Wave” were populist in nature. They grew organically through a mutual disaffection with the overall state of things, and all shared an inherent belief that ordinary people and artists alike can and should affect and direct the order of things. It could be said that a collective and incessant wind of change was blowing in each scenario that acted as a catalyst for change and increased communication and understanding. One of the central and crucial strengths generated by these movements is also a central and crucial strength generated by all forms of art in general. Those involved were able to launch multi-platform attacks against those in power that had the potential to influence and organize people across all walks of life. Music, art, film, literature and fashion all united to form a coherent, meaningful and powerful subculture that was able to effectively communicate the aims and goals of its adherents. The other deciding factor that all of these movements have in common with each other is the influence passed on to them by the Beat and “New Wave” movements. These fringe societies forged a precedent that it was

possible to stand up against repressive and stagnating regimes, often in a non-violent manner, and to make a difference in the world as a whole.

The writers of the Beat and “New Wave” movements managed to effectively chronicle the varying stages of a burgeoning literary movement. Though they hailed from diverse cultural and political realities, and were situated half a world a way from each other, many of the strategies and methods they employed, as well as the conclusions that they arrived at are strikingly similar. The unique combination of literature, music, fashion, lifestyle and sense of community existed in both scenes and stood in blatant disregard for the respective regimes in which they labored. The fact that both of these movements managed to achieve such parity, initially completely independently of each other, is a testament to the overall accuracy of their endeavors. It also acts as definitive evidence that the parameters of artistic expression were undergoing rapid changes in the postwar world. In the Soviet Union, political ideology and the tenets of Socialist Realism no longer held sway over the most creative and important artists, or the people that they purported to represent. Through the herculean Soviet exploits in World War II and the attendant horrors contained therein, the old mode of expression was simply no longer a viable option. The same conditions can be said to have existed in the postwar reality of the US. Too many had seen too much, and the staid and isolationist situation in America at this time simply did not offer enough for people who fundamentally disagreed

with these sensibilities. Writers on both sides of the Iron Curtain were able to tap into this new form of universal truth and consequently expose the sins of their respective countries in a new and thoughtful way. Ginsberg's "Howl" acted as a catalyst for this, and in conjunction with the work of Kerouac and Burroughs, among others, was able to forge a new identity for American expression. Conversely, Aksyonov, Voznesensky and other luminaries of the Russian "New Wave" were able to achieve the same goals in the Soviet Union almost simultaneously. With the addition of jazz and its surrounding culture to this already heady brew, it is of little wonder that the respective movements made such an impact on the literary and cultural world stage. Many in the world were crying out for something different to the existing cultural realities of the postwar world and the Beat Generation and the Russian "New Wave" movements were able to respond in kind, in an urgent and relevant manner.

And while ultimately these movements may share many differences, it is the many similarities, which are remarkable and provide insight into a much more culturally diverse and interesting phenomenon that ultimately spanned the globe. In many ways the two movements acted as a mirror image of each other. They were able to arrive at similar conclusions from widely divergent starting places in terms of politics, culture and the overall structure of their respective societies in general. It is important to keep in mind that the time in question was a much larger world in terms of scope. Modern technologies, that we now take for

granted, simply did not exist. Therefore it took much more effort, strategy and simple luck for an artist's work to reach a truly international audience. It is significant that these seemingly divergent movements, and others like them, utilized art across all mediums in an effort to arrive at a more coherent conclusion. Members of both the Beats and the Russian "New Wave" embraced music, literature and fashion, to construct an alternative world that existed and flourished outside the parameters of mainstream society. And, while at the beginning, these movements were unaware of each other on a large scale, the mutual influence of intertextuality is also important to consider. Intertextuality, or the borrowing, transformation and influence of existent texts, helped to inform and push the writing of these respective movements in new and interesting directions. Due to the communal nature of these movements, the respective members were able to feed off and expand upon each other's literary achievements, both in terms of style and content. As a result, the creativity and output of the writers was able to improve and mutate in a rapid fashion, which led to many stylistic breakthroughs that in turn led to the creation of new and exciting art forms. These characteristics were also shared and developed by jazz musicians, through the use of improvisation and "jam sessions," that would often last for hours at a time. These practices saw the music advance at a stunning pace, as is in evidence by the rapid progression of the music from the "swing" variant to the more hard edged and more culturally viable "bop" variant. When

seen in this context, it is possible to come to the conclusion that the jazz, literary and fashion movements as personified by the Beats, the Russian “New Wave” and the Stilyagi, were able to coalesce into a force that fundamentally carried the same message and arrived at similar conclusions. When taken at face value, the legacy left behind by these monumental movements combined to form a mosaic of the modern artistic world at that time. In turn, this legacy functions as a snapshot in time that documents the struggles of artists from both sides of one of the biggest political divides in the history of the world. It showcases their efforts to improve and enrich the world at large through vision, integrity and hope for a better tomorrow. As a consequence, the Beat movement enriches the “New Wave” movement and vice versa, and jazz is the glue that binds them all together. Together these art forms produced a coherent, though assorted, and ultimately worldwide movement that was able to simultaneously celebrate its diversity and point the way to a brighter and more fully realized future.

The influence wielded by the Beat and “New Wave” movements, and the literature and culture that they helped to spawn, engendered and influenced countless others to do the same. And while in many ways Beat writing served the same purpose, it can be said that the Soviet variant helped to act as a sort of artificial and collective memory that ensured those who were exposed to these works would never forget the heady days of the Stilyagi, or the joys of the era of the Thaw. Brief though they may have been, these days continue to shine

brightly in the creative life of a country that is often at war with itself from a cultural and political aspect. The last lines of *The Burn* function in this manner of collective memory and conscious as regards the Thaw, with the additional caveat that things will always continue to move forward. In fact these lines signify that it is vitally imperative that things must always continue to move forward, with little regard to the consequences:

Сколько это продолжалось, не нам знать. Потом все снова поехало. (442)

(How long it lasted, we knew not. Then everything started moving again) [Glenny, 528]

Yet again, the concept of movement is central and essential to the tenets espoused by these literary giants. And the meaning presented here is twofold. Firstly, it is more difficult for the authorities to hit a moving target. Secondly, and more importantly, we as a collective society must move forward to progress.

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