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MAN IN BLACK: PUTIN. POWER. IMAGE

The 1939 Hollywood feature film *Ninotchka* stars Greta Garbo as a Soviet envoy dispatched to Paris to oversee the sale of jewels confiscated from the Russian royal family by the Bolshevik government. Garbo's character, Comrade Iakushova, debarks from the train in a stern, mannish suit. Her first sight of Parisian fashion, a whimsical hat in a shop window, appalls her: "How can such a civilization survive that allows women to put things like that on their heads? It won't be long now comrades." (*Ninotchka*) Yet in short order, the frigid Soviet ideologue Comrade Iakushova becomes the distinctly more obliging *Ninotchka*, seduced as much, it would seem, by the modishness and luxury of Paris clothing as by the slick romantic patter of the gigolo Baron D'Algout (played by Melvyn Douglas).

The leitmotif of trading clothes as a mark of trading ideologies runs throughout the film. In fact, in the opening scenes precipitating the arrival of Garbo's character in Paris, we see the delegation of three scruffy-looking male Bolsheviks who preceded her there replace their workers' garments with newly purchased black suits, changing political allegiances, as it turns out, as fast as they change their outfits.



Figure 1 (captured from film)

Taking my cue from this early Western staging of Soviet Russia's inevitable capitulation to the softer, smoother, consumption-driven West, in this article I want to ask what we get from 'reading' popular culture, or, more specifically, what can President Vladimir Putin's clothes tell us about Russia today?

Let me begin by articulating several premises that underpin my further remarks in order to clarify why I believe that talking about the president of the Russian Federation's clothing is richly emblematic of the paradigm shift in the role of popular culture in shaping post-Soviet Russian identity politics. To cite the entry on "popular culture" from that authoritative apotheosis of popular culture, the communal internet reference project, *Wikipedia*:

Curiously, though almost everybody spends their lives immersed in popular culture, nobody seems able to agree on what popular culture consists of. ... Historically, commentators on culture defined the term "popular culture" in negative terms as those parts or expressions of culture not accepted into the cultural milieu of the social élite [sic] (such as courts, the nobility, patricians or the rich bourgeoisie), nor in an institutionalized context (such as professional theatre, church liturgy, military life). Some distinguish the products of high culture as "art" (i.e., sacred) and popular culture as mere "entertainment" (i.e., "profane"). (*Wikipedia*)

I deliberately chose to take my initial defining terms from *Wikipedia*, rather than some more academic, not to mention 'high culture' source, not only because the quote does indeed get at the heart of the issue, but because the very terms of existence of the *Wikipedia* project underscore the particular problems of defining popular culture in the Soviet and, therefore, the post-Soviet context, problems that cast the ambivalent function and the equally ambivalent relation to institutional structure of popular culture in the Soviet Union into sharp relief.

Wikipedia, as already indicated, might be considered the ultimate exercise in popular culture — an internet encyclopedia to which anyone (or at least anyone who is literate and has access to a computer) can contribute. It therefore potentially embodies the four major features of any popular culture artifact. The first two of these features, suggested by the quote from *Wikipedia*, are open accessibility to all strata of society and minimal subordination to an institutionalized cultural hierarchy. To these two features it is necessary to add two more related and defining features: that is, first, for a phenomenon to belong properly to popular culture it must involve an element of choice; and, second, there must be some mechanism by which the choice of the consumer has some influence, no matter how indirect, on cultural production. Given the fact that ideology, rather than the market, drove the production of culture in the Soviet Union almost to the end of that empire's existence, at least three of the defining features of popular culture outlined here were compromised and even the fourth, based on the distinction between high and low culture, was skewed.

To make the point more clearly — and to begin heading back to my central topic, that is, Putin’s clothing in post-Soviet Russia — let me turn to the Russian version of *Wikipedia* (*Википедия*). In place of the “Popular Culture” entry in the English version we find an entry headed “mass culture” («массовая культура») in the Russian-language version. It is precisely the imperfect correspondence between these two terms — ‘popular culture’ and ‘mass culture’ — which, over the decades, has plagued scholars engaged in the study of Soviet culture who have taken as their point of departure theoretical constructs originating in the Western experience. Popular culture as we understand it in the West would seem to be inseparable from the market — along with all the tools from bestseller lists to opinion polls and focus groups associated with it — which, no matter how imperfectly, function as mechanisms of consumer choice, that is, registers of popularity. This point must be emphasized: the possibility of choice is an inalienable feature of Western popular culture. While manifestations of popular culture in the West may indeed converge with mass culture, in that they may be targeted at the largest possible audience, a comparison with the experience of the Soviet East makes eminently clear how imperfectly synonymous the two terms in fact are.

In the Soviet Union, at least until the waning years of *glasnost*, while there certainly was a black market in such banned western commodities as Beatles records and blue jeans, there was no official market to regulate or drive the production of culture across the spectrum of the arts. Soviet culture, at least in aspiration, was monolithic and subordinated to political exigency, and the state was the only patron. Audience choice was therefore reduced to a minimum and, at least in theory, the distinction between art and entertainment was erased, since neither could transcend ideology. Art might be entertaining, but not so as to distract from constant political vigilance. And, since all art, from ballet to folkdance, opera to popular song, Pushkin’s poetry to television serials, was to be for the masses, the Western distinction between high and low culture was overshadowed by the distinction between official and unofficial art, between art that toed the party line and art — whether produced inside or outside official institutional structures — that appeared to challenge state sponsored aesthetic demands. And then there was the gray area in between, the space where the line between cultural producer and audience blurred, the territory of humor (whether or not overtly political), double entendre, and reading between the lines — the space where the Soviet audience made official Soviet culture its own, ‘popular’ culture.

With the collapse of the Soviet system, a western-style culture market emerged in Russia with a vengeance. Post-Soviet Russian television was flooded with Mexican soap operas and game shows, and advertisements for foreign-produced luxury goods most struggling citizens could not possibly aspire to purchase. As the decade of the nineties wore on, homegrown Russian detective and romance novelists began to edge the earlier dominant hasty translations of western popular

fiction off the newly ubiquitous bestseller lists; Russian talk shows, crime series, and reality shows filled the air waves; and even more recently Russian chat rooms devoted to a vast array of popular culture phenomena have begun to proliferate on the internet. There is even talk of violating one of Moscow's most revered central spaces, Pushkin Square, by surrounding the statue of Russia's beloved national poet with a multi-storey shopping mall. With this era of choice — to buy or not to buy — the hottest items on the market range from designer clothes to artifacts spoofing the communist past, in other words, from what was earlier inaccessible to what was earlier out of bounds to the carnivalesque realm of popular culture. Everything would appear to be fair game, including the president of the Russian Federation himself — his features reproduced in chocolate,¹ on *matrioshki*, not to mention a T-shirt by the Russian designer Denis Simachev² that retailed for over \$200. Yet despite the sea change in cultural consumption in Russia in the past fifteen years, I would suggest that there is a powerful synergy between the capitalist present and the legacy of the Soviet past discernible in Putin's image — as the designer Simachev has indicated in labeling Putin “a modern trademark for the Russian Federation” (Rudebeck).

To begin then, let us look at Putin against the Soviet and post-Soviet leaders who preceded him. Most obviously, the attention Putin — and his image-makers — pay to his appearance and the attention his appearance attracts on the part of those interested in fashion marks a distinct break with his predecessors.

Lenin, who might well have served as a template for the three bumbling Bolsheviks in *Ninotchka*, never left behind the look of the shabby exiled revolutionary. Stalin, although monumentalized in omnipresent artistic representations, was Spartan in his dress, as documented by an eyewitness: “He was always dressed the same. A military uniform? That's not exactly right. Rather the hint of a uniform — something like, but even simpler than the garb of a simple soldier: a tightly buttoned jacket and wide khaki trousers.” (Duel)

Khrushchev's most memorable fashion statement was certainly the controversial issue of the shoe or sandal he may or may not have slammed down at the United Nations to emphasize his purported threat, “We will bury you.” And, as far as Brezhnev is concerned, a 2004 article on the general secretary's personal tailor was headed by the editorial observation: “Leonid II'ich Brezhnev was a man who has remained in our memory as monolithic and monotonous. Remembering him, it would never even occur to us that he, like all normal people, changed suits,

¹ For the image of shop assistant Natalya Butova holding a chocolate portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin in a chocolate shop in Moscow, Friday, Nov. 21, 2003, see: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-11/22/content_283711.htm (Last consulted October 2, 2006).

² For the image on Simachev's Putin T-shirt, see the Spring 2003 collection on Simachev's web page: <http://www.denissimachev.com/content/collections.html>. (Last consulted October 2, 2006). Note also Simachev's predilection for all-black outfits resembling uniforms.

shirts, and ties. Because we never saw the difference, it was practically invisible to the human eye.” (Mikhailovskaia) The same journalist who wrote the preceding words, assured by Brezhnev’s personal tailor that the General Secretary owned “fourteen suits, which allowed him to change them, without repeating, for a week,” concluded “It just seemed to us that he was always wearing one and the same thing, we just didn’t see the difference in his shirts and ties, as a child does not see the difference between a man of fifty and a man of seventy. To him they are both old men.” (Ibid.) Gorbachev, in line with his political predilections may have bought suits in the West, but according to Brezhnev’s tailor again, Yeltsin “was little concerned with clothing.” (Ibid.)



Figure 2 (<http://www.compromat.ru/main/putin/putintv.htm>)

Figure 2 makes satiric comment on Putin’s clothes in relation to those of his predecessors, clearly suggesting that he takes virtually effete care with his dress.

Certainly, since the beginning of his first term as Russian president, clothing Putin has been and remains a costly enterprise. A 2001 Russian news report tallied up the estimated value of Putin’s wardrobe — including suits made at home by “a whole brigade of tailors ... in a closed special workshop of the Administration of Affairs,” as well as those Putin buys for himself from Western designers, favor-

ing the Italian Brioni, John Lob boots and an array of Italian shoes and sandals, a Patek Philippe watch, a \$1,500 Parker pen — at a half million dollars. (Alferova and Nechaeva) Of course the most notorious instance of Putin's fancy for expensive Western baubles was his appropriation of Robert Kraft's Super Bowl championship ring during a visit to the Kremlin by the owner of the New England Patriots, a 'fashion statement' of sorts that quickly made international headlines. Putin's willingness to sport high-end Western merchandise — to dress up to or even out-dress the other members of the G-8 — transparently signals his readiness to represent Russia politically on the playing field of global capitalism, mustering its emblems and perquisites. Putin does indeed appear to be the trademark of the new capitalist Russia.



Figure 3 (<http://traveltorussia.biz/russia/history.html>)

Yet, upon closer scrutiny, there are ways in which Putin's 'look,' despite its cosmopolitan gloss, is subtly, and sometimes not so subtly reminiscent of the Soviet past. The youngish Putin, for instance, is the first Russian leader since 1917 actually to resemble the 'new man' the Soviet system hoped to create: athletic, healthy, and clean cut as the system he was to underpin. There is something of the diligent pioneer in Putin's official photographs. Moreover, recalling Brezhnev most of all, Putin's expensive wardrobe tends toward the monotone. Whether dressing for affairs of state or rock concerts, Putin favors black.

At least on the face of things, Putin's preference for black suits hardly distinguishes him from other world leaders. In his 1995 study of the history of male fashion, *Men in Black*, John Harvey draws a connection between the evolution

through the nineteenth century to the present of the “great renunciation” he sees in male clothing — that is, the adoption of the black suit as the dominant form of masculine dress — and the ascendancy of the middle-class male in the capitalist order, making powerful associative links between somber dress and seriousness, sobriety, and even a residual suggestion of mourning. (Harvey) In the simplest terms, dressing in black meant dressing for success. Speaking to the contemporary context, Wendy Somerson, in her article, “A Corporate Multicultural Universe: Replacing the Nation-State with *Men in Black*,” reads the 1997 American blockbuster film, *Men in Black*, as an allegory for the late capitalist world order in which “corporations have completely wrested control from the government.” (218)

Given recent confrontations between government and business in Russia which in no uncertain terms confirmed the subordination of private enterprise to the state and the national to the transnational in the politics of Putin’s Russia today, there might appear to be a rather bitter irony in suggesting that *Men in Black* (*MIB*) might in any way help to illuminate Putin’s appeal. Yet, perhaps because they have common roots in Cold War mythologies, there does appear to be an eerie resonance between the film and the president. The *MIB* — an acronym reminiscent not only, as Somerson points out, of such corporations as IBM, but perhaps also of the KGB as well — is a corporation the operation of which transcends national boundaries and the mission of which is to protect human beings from the threat of the space aliens that dwell among us. The *MIB* operatives — represented in the film by agents J and K (played by Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith) dressed in expensive black Armani suits and cool shades and armed with the latest in sci-fi techno chic — track down wayward space creatures and erase from the memories of ordinary humans all recollection of extraterrestrial contacts. The Men in Black thus represent a new global management elite who control knowledge to keep the rest of us safe. Of course, I would not make so bold as to suggest that Vladimir Putin styles himself in deliberate imitation of any particular Hollywood film, yet, in this context, what are we to make of the internet site *vladimirvladimirovich.ru* on which new Putin jokes (*анекдоты*) are posted daily. One of the leitmotifs of this epic in jokes is that Putin (like all world leaders) has a Martian residing in his head.

Tapping into the pricy black designer suit as an index of global power in the reign of capitalism, Putin stakes his claim to a place on the world stage through conspicuous spending — a post-socialist variant of what the historian Richard Wortman has termed the Romanovs’ “scenarios of power.” (Wortman) In this context, in the same vein as the infamous palming of the Kraft ring, yet another leitmotif of the ongoing *vladimirvladimirovich.ru* project — Putin’s cell phone with a single button in the shape of a gold double-headed eagle — exposes the role of lavish spending in establishing Putin’s prestige among

his peers, a sort of international keeping up with the Jones — and even with Jack Nicholson and Bill Clinton.³

Yet even if, as commentators have suggested, Putin dresses more carefully for his meetings with world leaders than he does at home, his predilection for black evokes an even richer set of associations on the president's home turf. Let us turn to Putin's favored, casual black outfit: the black sport jacket or suit over a black turtleneck. I want to concentrate here on Putin's decision to wear this outfit on some key, symbolically loaded occasions, one of which was what drew me to this topic in the first place. As you will see from figure 4, Putin arrived in the North Ossetian town of Beslan in the wake of the bloody denouement of the school siege there by Chechen terrorists dressed in expressly that outfit. When I first saw the news report of Putin visiting wounded children in the Beslan hospital on September 4, 2004 shrouded in black, I was struck by how attention-grabbing his clothes were, even in the midst of the carnage, precisely because his get up evoked so many not necessarily compatible associations: grief, chic,⁴ familiarity, and a darker, even sinister shade of authority.



Figure 4 (“Russian President Vladimir Putin visits a hospital in Beslan, Northern Ossetia, to meet victims of the hostage crisis, Saturday, Sept. 4, 2004. Putin made a surprise visit early Saturday to the southern Russian town of Beslan where commandos stormed a school where militants held hundreds of children hostage in a chaotic battle, the Interfax news agency reported.” (AP Photo/ITAR-TASS, Presidential Press Service))

³ For pictures of Putin with Jack Nicholson and Bill Clinton, see <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Parliament/5160/Putin/public.html> and http://www.putin2004.com/default.aspx?id=_Photos. (Last consulted October 2, 2006).

⁴ Galina Aksenova noted in response to this presentation that wearing black was probably the only way one could dress fashionably in the Leningrad of Putin's youth.

Of the many other examples I could reproduce here of Putin in black attire, images of the President of the Russian Federation at Paul McCartney's Red Square Concert in 2003 present a particularly rich instance.



Figure 5. (captured from the video of the McCartney concert, *Paul McCartney — Live in Red Square* (2003)).

Putin draws a clear distinction in his clothing, wearing a proper black suit for his state visit with the rock icon and his wife, while changing into his casual 'blacks' to slip out of the Kremlin and into the concert, mingling with the people, mixing it up with them up close and personal. I do not think that it is too much to say that this concert was one of the most emotionally charged and symbolic cultural events of the post-Soviet period in no small measure because Putin professed his admiration for the liberating message of the Beatles, banned in their youth in Soviet times. The concert therefore marked a reconciliation, perhaps even a convergence between state authority and popular culture in a breathtakingly public renunciation of the former Soviet political and cultural gerocracy.

Let us look then at marked images from the store of Russian popular culture Putin's preferred mode of dress appears to recall. There is, of course, the image of the government functionary, dressed in drab and therefore featureless. Yet given Russia's and Putin's communist heritage, we cannot help but see how functionary shades over into secret police agent and spy. In fact Putin has himself acknowledged that he drew inspiration in his choice of a career path in the KGB from arguably the most popular fictional spy of the Soviet period, Max Otto von Shirlitz,

the protagonist of the 1973 Soviet TV miniseries, *Seventeen Moments in Spring* (*Семнадцать мгновений весны*), chronicling Shtirlitz's adventures, dressed in Nazi black, as a highly placed Soviet mole in the Nazi central command during the final months of World War II.



Figure 6 (The actor Viacheslav Tikhonov as Shtirlitz <http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/apr05-macfadyen.html>)



Figure 7 (http://www.terradaaily.com/reports/Outside_View_Russias_Future.html)

Despite its heavy handed ideological slant and occasionally buffoonishly incredible characters and situations, *Seventeen Moments in Spring* and its leading character unquestionably achieved genuine popularity among the Soviet viewership, a popularity reflected to the present day by large audiences drawn by reruns of the series and by the persistence of Shtirlitz jokes.⁵ Putin, who spent years as a KGB

⁵ For more on this, see Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, "The Blockbuster Miniseries on Soviet TV: Isaev-Stirlitz, the Ambiguous Hero of *17 Moments in Spring*," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review (Post-Communist Popular Culture and the Detektiv Novel Genre*, ed. by Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover), No. 3, 2002.

agent in East Germany, has claimed, “I only learned German because Shtirlitz spoke it.” (Anecdotes) In the iconography of post-Soviet Russia, Putin’s black turtleneck, jacket, and slacks cannot help but recall stereotypical representations of the new Russian Mafiosi and of the new Russian oligarchs as well, not least of all Putin’s arch-nemesis Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the ex-head of the Russian oil giant Yukos who now sits languishing in a Russian prison.



Figure 8 (“Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former Russian oil giant Yukos CEO, looks from behind bars in a Moscow court, Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2004. Moscow’s Basmanny District Court has frozen Yukos’ 34.5-percent stake in Sibneft at the request of the Prosecutor General’s office. Prosecutors may confiscate the stake if they prove it was acquired using funds accumulated through tax evasion. Yukos’ stock plunged 8.7 percent in trading early Wednesday at Moscow’s Interbank Currency Exchange.” (AP Photo))

Finally, going back again even further in time, to yet another prototypical image which might at first glance seem a farfetched model for Putin, I would remind here that the popular Soviet actor and bard, Vladimir Vysotsky (1938-1980), who died young and became a cult figure, dressed in black both in his most famous role as Hamlet and in offstage life. And in some popular renditions (*vladimir.vladimirovich.ru*, for instance), Putin does indeed appear as something of a post-Soviet Hamlet, weighed down by deep philosophical considerations and ever thwarted by his retinue of incompetent androids.



Figure 9 (<http://www.vladimir-vysotsky.de/bilder/hamlet6.jpg>)

It is necessary to remember, first of all, that Putin's popularity among the majority of his citizenry remains indisputable. It would appear paradoxical that a popular, even charismatic leader has repeatedly been accused of being nondescript, or even featureless. Yet what I have tried to argue is that this is precisely the source of the power of his image, or as one female voter put it:

It is important for a woman to have a reliable, self-assured man near her on whom she would have a possibility to rely on in hard times. Then let the stones fall from the sky — it would not be terrible. Unfortunately, nowadays it is very difficult to find such men. It seems to me that Putin is a man of this kind, insignificant outwardly, but strong by spirit (Quoted in Riabova)

As I have tried to demonstrate, what the 'men in black' evoked by Putin's clothing share is a liminal status with regard to cultural and political boundaries and hierarchies so that the apparently 'featureless' Putin comes to represent a potently polysemous convergence of Soviet and post-Soviet popular culture icons and contemporary fashion trends. This convergence simultaneously renders Putin transparent and enigmatic, frustrating attempts to 'understand' him, while allowing an overwhelming majority of the Russian populace to find reassuring meaning in him. So, to take liberties with Winston Churchill's famous pronouncement about Russia: Putin is a riddle, wrapped in an enigma, inside a black turtleneck.



Figure 10 (<http://jp.senescence.info/comedy/putin.html>.)

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Катрин Теймер Непомнящая

ЧЕЛОВЕК В ЧЕРНОМ: ПУТИН. ВЛАСТЬ. ИМИДЖ

Резюме

В статье рассматривается значение одежды Президента Владимира Путина в качестве явления популярной культуры. Со времен развала Советского Союза, структура культуры в России драматически изменилась, и новые форма и функция образа лидера страны служат показателем этой перемены. Основной тезис заключается в том, что в изменившемся культурном ландшафте мы можем истолковать факт путинского предпочтения к черной, особенно дорогой одежде в качестве критерия поливалентности образа президента. В роли «человека в черном», образ Путина вызывает рефлексию одновременно к советскому прошлому и глобальному капиталистическому настоящему. В итоге, черная одежда Путина наводит на мысль о том, что его популярность частично основана на его кажущейся невыразительности, бесцветности — на его способности означать в сегодняшней России все для всех людей.

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy

CZŁOWIEK W CZERNI. PUTIN. WŁADZA. IMAGE

Streszczenie

W artykule analizowane jest znaczenie stroju prezydenta Władimira Putina jako zjawiska kultury popularnej. Od czasu rozpadu Związku Radzieckiego pragmatyka kultury w Rosji uległa zmianie. Nowe formy i funkcje obrazu lidera kraju są symptomem tych przemian. Podstawowa teza artykułu sprowadza się do twierdzenia, że w nowych warunkach możemy zinterpretować fakt przywiązania Putina do czarnych i drogich strojów jako kryterium poliwalentnego obrazu prezydenta. W roli faceta w czerni obraz Putina odsyła równocześnie do radzieckiej przeszłości i globalnej kapitalistycznej teraźniejszości. W rezultacie czarne stroje Putina wskazują na to, że jego popularność jest częściowo oparta na pozornym braku wyrazu, bezbarwności — na stosowanej przez niego zasadzie, aby oznaczać w dzisiejszej Rosji wszystko dla wszystkich.