

# The Courtauld



Still from *The Hymns of Muscovy* (2017). Video by Dimitri Venkov.

**International Two-Day Conference**

## **The Weaponisation of History: Refracting Soviet Memories in Contemporary Russia and Beyond**

**6 - 7 June 2025**

**The Courtauld Institute of Art, Vernon Square**

# Introduction

Since the USSR collapsed and independent nations emerged, the Russian state has shaped its national identity by funnelling multiple complex histories into a singular narrative of superpower. Repressive law supplemented with prescriptive visual culture develops a usable past that justifies present political policies and future objectives. As state sponsored cults of memory overflow into cults of war, this "struggle for history" is also a "struggle for mastery" and a national idea that serves the military industrial complex and justifies foreign policy, including the ongoing war in Ukraine.

This conference counterposes memory politics of the Russian state with art and research that confront history as a state tool of manipulation: grey zones, camouflage, masks, mirror images, sites of refusal, and nostalgia. We seek strategies for fostering independent thought within censorious, politicised realms, and investigate how artistic imagery might support or else create ballast against attempts to reify, coalesce and weaponise complex and diverse Soviet pasts into a singular line.

Presented papers explore the complexities of reinterpreting Soviet memory in contemporary Russia, the Eastern European and Central Asian nations that once shaped the Soviet Union. The conference focuses on visual contemporary arts practices from the early 2009 (falsification of history law) to 2025. It embraces divisions, disagreements, and diverse ways of thinking, seeking to shape a framework for contested and multidirectional memories.

**Organised by Kitty Brandon-James, PhD Researcher, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, and Elena Konyushikhina, PhD Researcher, The Courtauld.**

# Programme Friday 6 June

Online | 15:00-19:00 BST | 10:00-14:00 EDT

- 15.00-15.10 **Opening Remarks**  
Professor Sarah Wilson & Organisers (The Courtauld Institute of Art, UK)
- 15.10-16.50 **Section I: Early Soviet & Present Day**
- 15.10 - 15.25 **Ilya Budraitskis (UC Berkeley, USA)**  
Glorifying the USSR, Criminalizing the Revolution: Putinism and the Image of 1917 in Popular Culture
- 15.25-15.40 **Natalia Tikhonova (Hamburg, Germany)**  
Militarisation of the Society on the Examples of Soviet Culture and Their Continuities in Contemporary Russia
- Post-Great Patriotic War Soviet & Present Day**
- 15.40-15.55 **Dr Anna Zadora (University of Strasbourg, France)**  
Refracting Soviet Memories in Belarus
- 15.55 - 16.10 **Anastasiia Korableva (University of Essex, UK)**  
Shaping Patriotic Identities: Propaganda Murals in Today's Russia
- 16.10 - 16.50 **Panel Discussion & Audience Q&A**  
Moderator– Ella Rossman, PhD candidate at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies
- 16.50 - 17.00 **Coffee Break**
- 17.00 - 18.45 **Section II: Modern & Present Day Russia**
- 17.00 - 17.15 **Dr Joe Colleyshaw (Manchester Metropolitan University; University of Leeds, UK)**  
Between Co-optation, Continuation and Innovation: Official Memory Discourse in Putin's Russia
- 17.15 - 17.30 **Dr Jade McGlynn (King's College London, UK)**  
An Old History for a New Future: Russian Historical Destruction and Propaganda in the Occupied Territories
- 17.30 - 17.45 **Dr Evgeniya Kondrashina (New York University Steinhardt, USA)**  
Reimagining the Past: The Role of Illustrations in the 2023 Official High School Textbooks on Russian and World History
- 18.00 - 18.40 **Panel Discussion & Audience Q&A**  
Moderator– Dr Michał Murawski (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, UK)
- 18.40 - 18.45 **Closing Remarks**

# Programme Saturday 7 June

**In Person | 11:00-17.00 BST**

## **Panel 2: Alternative Histories: Microhistory and Independent Perspectives**

This session looks at the capacity of contemporary visual culture (and particularly contemporary art) to critically engage with Soviet histories. Tackling historical amnesia, nostalgia, selective memory, the panel provides insights on how arts challenge dominant historical frameworks to offer alternative perspectives, that might re-stage the past, and rearticulate relationships between memory, ideology, and civil society.

**11.00-11.10    Opening Remarks**

Professor Sarah Wilson & Organisers (The Courtauld Institute of Art, UK)

**11.10 - 12.20    Section I: Visual Tactics for Reframing History**

**11.10 - 11.25    Alexey Izosimov (University of Cambridge, UK)**

Imagining Alternative Pasts for a Better Future: Heritage and Memory Activism in Contemporary Russia

**11.25 - 11.40    Dr Cristina Moraru (George Enescu University of Arts Iași, Romania)**

Counter-Memories and Alternative Narratives: Artistic Interventions in Soviet Histories

**11.40 - 11.55    Elena Konyushikhina (The Courtauld Institute of Art, UK)**

Visual Strategies of Representing the Soviet Past in Contemporary Russian Art

**11.55 - 12.20    Panel Discussion & Audience Q&A**

Moderator—Dr Elena Zaytseva (London, UK)

**12.20 - 13.10    Lunch**

**13.10 - 15.10    Section II: Trauma & Gulag**

**13.10 - 13.25    Professor Kristian Feigelson (University Sorbonne Nouvelle, France)**

Filming the Gulag: between history and memory

**13.25 - 13.40    Dr Tatiana Efrussi (Paris, France)**

Norilsk: Landscape of Trauma and Nostalgia

**Utopia & Lost Belief**

**13.40 - 13.55    Andrea Liu (Zurich University of the Arts, New York/Berlin)**

What is Russian About Russian Cosmism?

**13.55 - 14.10    Dr Ana Dević (Aix-Marseille University, France)**

Memory as Creative Practice? Remembering the Soviet Era at the 2017 Tate Exhibitions and Talks

**14.10 - 14.25    Dr Elizaveta Konovalova (Paris, France)**

Svoboda. 1919. 2020.

Recasting the Soviet Statue of Liberty

- 14.25 - 15.10 **Panel Discussion & Audience Q&A**  
Moderator – Dr Alma Prelec (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, UK)
- 15.10-15.20 **Coffee Break**

### **Panel 3 Power in the Grey Zones: Camouflage and Interconnectedness-Blurred Boundaries**

This panel explores the intersection between the transmission and reception of historical narratives. It investigates how messages are received by audiences and how these messages can be played with. Speakers look at the blurred boundaries of contact zones: at cynicism, doublespeak and double consciousness. They seek a framework that works with productive gaps in meaning making and reception. Together, they ask: What lies beyond representation?

- 15.20 - 15.35 **Professor Maria Engstrom (Uppsala University, Sweden)**  
The Civilizational Turn and Metamodern Recycling of the Soviet Past in Contemporary Russian Visual Culture
- 15.35 - 15.50 **Kitty Brandon-James (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, UK)**  
Neither Past nor Present: Neither Dead nor Alive. The Phenomenon of Zombie Monuments.
- 15.50 - 16.05 **Valentin Diaconov (Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, UK)**  
Staging Colonialism: Chukotka Art Works as an Investigation and an Argument
- 16.05 - 16.20 **Paul Dza (Sipa Press, French Institute of Geopolitics, France)**  
*"1941-1945 Z" [...] "Sorry, we were forced" [...] "Rus and Ukr are one nation!"*  
Russian War Narratives Through Soldiers' Graffiti in Ukraine.
- 16.20 - 16.55 **Panel Discussion & Audience Q&A**  
Moderator– Dr Dzmitry Suslau, (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, UK)
- 16.55 - 17.00 **Closing Remarks**
- 17.00 - 18.00 **Wine Reception**

# Abstracts & Bios

**Kitty Brandon-James**

***Neither Past nor Present: Neither Dead nor Alive. The Phenomenon of Zombie Monuments.***

This paper explores the contact zones between Moscow's monuments and their interlocutors, examining critical artistic responses to monuments falling and rising from the 1990s to the present. Pairing resurrection as corollary of the messianism underpinning Putinist cosmology, it uses the trope of *zombie monuments* to describe cultural dualisms: an undead pantheon of strong leaders – Tsars, Metropolitans, generals – reanimated to retrofit and reengineer state memory monopolies; and, in contrast, an often-obscured, evolving citizen political imaginary that engages with these monuments through aesthetic strategies. By looking at this contact zone between monuments and their audiences, the paper seeks to productively situate the monument within the framework of the carnivalesque—a Bakhtinian dialogic player whose ideological significance is not fixed but open to ongoing renegotiation through audience participation and reinterpretation by subsequent interlocutors, thereby enabling its continuous (if quiet) revival and transformation.

**Kitty Brandon-James** is a PhD candidate at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies and a Higher Education Teaching Fellow. Her research uses informality as a lens through which to understand the development of the cultural field in Moscow between 2012–2022. Kitty teaches at UCL and The Courtauld Institute of Art. She has worked as a lecturer and curator in Moscow, has published internationally, and is a founding member of the GC Action Group and the Bad Art Society.

**Ilya Budraitskis**

***Glorifying the USSR, Criminalizing the Revolution: Putinism and the Image of 1917 in Popular Culture***

At the heart of Putin's contemporary memory politics is the term "historical Russia," meaning the direct continuity between all state forms in the national history. From this perspective, there is little difference between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as they reproduced the same state under different names. However, the 1917 revolution, which sought to establish a new social and political order, is, from the Kremlin's perspective, criminal and a violation of the idea of "historical Russia." In my presentation, I will focus on several examples of this criminalization of revolution in Russian mass culture.

**Ilya Budraitskis** is a political and cultural theorist and Visiting Scholar in the Program in Critical Theory at UC Berkeley. He writes widely on Russian politics and culture, including in *Radical Philosophy*, *New Left Review*, *Jacobin*, *e-flux*, and *OpenDemocracy*. A member of the *Moscow Art Magazine* editorial board, he co-edited *Post-Post Soviet?* (with Ekaterina Degot, University of Chicago Press, 2014). His book *Dissidents among Dissidents* (Verso, 2022) won the Andrey Bely Prize and was shortlisted for the Deutscher Memorial Prize. His next book, co-authored with Ilya Matveev, is under revision at Stanford University Press.

**Joe Colleyshaw**

***Between Co-optation, Continuation and Innovation: Official Memory Discourse in Putin's Russia***

This article looks to engage with institutional provision of official memory discourse in Putin's Russia, specifically the work of state-backed organisations such as the Russia History Fund (RHF) and the Russian Military Historical Society (RVIO) and their broad public works. Specifically, I argue for the tripartite approach to history that the Russian state is taking at home and abroad by further institutionalising memory to cement its own view of Russian history which centres around core principles of Putinism.

**Joe Colleyshaw** is jointly lecturer in Russian Politics at Manchester Metropolitan University and Teaching Fellow in Russian and Slavonic Studies at Leeds University. His research focuses on the rehabilitation of later imperial Russian histories within Putin's Russia. He holds a PhD in Slavic Studies from Brown University, where he also acted as Visiting Assistant Professor in Slavic studies, teaching on contemporary political and cultural discourse in Russia, Ukraine and the Post-Soviet Space.



**Ana Dević**

***Memory as Creative Practice? Remembering the Soviet Era at the 2017 Tate Exhibitions and Talks***

The paper looks at the 2017-2018 events at Tate Modern, organized for the centenary of the October Revolution, which featured the display of propaganda posters and photographs titled "Red Star", the exhibition of works by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov "Not Everyone will be taken into the Future," and the workshops titled "Contemporary Russian Artists" with Sasha Pirogova, Mikhail Tolmachev and Arseny Zhilyaev. The workshops invited the visitors to take part in them in the following ways: (1) responding (with their movements/ actions) to the images that the artist offered to them individually (Sasha Pirogova); (2) bringing their personal photos to the workshop, inspired by the artist's work with the photo archive of the Solovetsky GULAG camp (Mikhail Tolmachev); and (3) drawing, sculpting, and conversing about the future of creative practices, with a historical link to Soviet futurism and the artist's work on the early Soviet approach to museology (the agenda to abolish museums), the Marxist art exhibitions of the 1920s, and the aesthetics of Russian Cosmism (Arseniy Zhilyaev). The paper will aim to compare and juxtapose the three types of Soviet memorization events taking place in Tate simultaneously, asking the following questions: (1) To what extent in what ways do the three events correspond with one another in terms of the re-examination of the Soviet past? (2) In comparing the three types of memorization, could we single out a more successful effort to critically engage with the past by means of emphasizing the positioning of artists in the current times in Russia?

**Ana Dević** obtained her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, San Diego. She has taught sociology at universities in Glasgow, Aarhus, and Fatih, and has been an adjunct professor at the University of Bologna since 2007. Her research focuses on nationalism, antinationalism, activist cinema and theatre, social movements, and art and memory activism. She has held Erasmus Mundus teaching awards and was a Marie-Sklodowska Curie and CELSA fellow at KU Leuven. Currently, she is a CIVIS3i senior research fellow at Aix-Marseille University, working on alternative-artistic commemorations of collective violence.

**Valentin Diaconov**

***Staging Colonialism: Chukotka Art Works as an Investigation and an Argument***

This paper focuses on *Chukotka Art Works*, an exhibition that has been part of a survey of Congolese (DRC) 'popular painting' at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, in 2017. In the exhibition, the curators, including the paper's presenter, compared the indigenous artistic practice of the chuckchee (self-designation: Lyg'oravetlans) – etching and sculpting on walrus tusks – to the artistic production in Congo (known as Zaire in 1971-1997). The exhibition argued that during the establishment of Soviet control over the territory in early 1920s and on to the Post-Soviet era this practice was a complex response to the encroaching metropolitan bureaucracy and its insistence on forced settlement and collective farming. Several examples of tusks from the 1920-30 show how the local style embraced the narratives of Socialist Realism, while inserting depictions of indigenous lives that were beyond the strict frameworks of Soviet moral codes. Later, in the 1950-70s, after a return to a more respectful cultural policy towards the minorities, the tusk carvers depicted local myths and narratives with a certain anti-Imperial bent, even though the original meanings of these stories were, presumably, lost on the Soviet collecting institutions. The interpretation (wall-text) of the exhibition presented a series of 'masks' that the colonizers donned to stage their expansionist advance ('teachers', 'gods', 'modernizers'). The paper also addresses some of the audience responses to the exhibition, a critique of its approach by Anna Engelhardt (2018), and an unpublished response to that critique by the curators. It concludes with a re-evaluation of the curators' approach in the context of the next stage of Russian imperialism that unfolds today, disastrously, in Ukraine.

**Valentin Diaconov** is a curator and art critic based at the Whitworth, Manchester, having left Russia in 2022. Formerly a curator at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, he has organised exhibitions by Rasheed Araeen, Juergen Teller, Sophia al-Maria, and on topics like Soviet comics and laughter, vestimentary politics, and the corruptive power of gift economies. Valentin has published prolifically:

for *Kommersant*, *e-flux Criticism*, *ArtGuide.Ru*, and *Glasstire* and others. From 2022 to 2024, he was core critic-in-residence at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. His research interests include hauntology, the ephemeral, and art that challenges today's conservative, necromantic tendencies. He holds a PhD in culture studies.

#### **Paul Dza**

**"1941-1945 Z" [...] "Sorry, we were forced" [...] "Rus and Ukr are one nation!" Russian war narratives through soldiers' graffiti in Ukraine.**

This proposal will examine how the symbolism used by the Russian soldiers in their graffiti relate to the Russian narratives, from references to the Great Patriotic War to the Soviet Union, and how this corpus provides a complementary approach to the analysis of the invasion of Ukraine. Although initially drawn from the sphere of art or urban studies, graffiti has been one of the traces analyzed by War studies, from cave paintings to the soldiers' graffiti in France during the First World War. However, the ones made by Russian soldiers in Ukraine are distinguished by two major aspects: carrying Russian cultural references, they are also very ephemeral, being quickly erased and difficult to witness. These short-lived expressions provide valuable insights into the lived experiences, ideologies, and power dynamics within a grey zone of the conflict.

Based on the work carried out by the Wall Evidence project and the author's contribution to it, this proposal will present the initiative, which is a semi-open-source inventory of graffiti left by Russian soldiers in combat zones or zones occupied by Russia in Ukraine since February 2022, and the artistic relationship with this sensitive corpus.

**Paul Dza** is an M.Phil. student at Paris 8 University / French Institute of Geopolitics focusing on memory politics and public space in the post-Soviet area. He has presented at AEGES (Bordeaux, 2023), IEGA/DGRIS (Paris, 2024), and MNU (Astana, 2025), and contributes to *The Wall Evidence* project. He is also a photographer and freelance reporter. His work appears in *ARTE*, *The Daily Mail*, *Meduza*, *Novaya Gazeta* and others. He was awarded the Prize of Political Photography (Sciences Po, 2020) and was a finalist for the Paris Match Grand Prix of Photojournalism (2021).

#### **Tatiana Efrussi**

***Norilsk: Landscape of Trauma and Nostalgia***

When working in Russia, I aimed to engage critically with local histories through in-depth research and archival exploration, drawing on my background as (art) historian. By reconstructing overlooked narratives and microhistories, I sought to challenge the dominant, state-sanctioned vision of the past – one shaped by imperialist, militarist, and patriarchal ideologies. I came to see Russian history as profoundly multi-layered: while the state manipulated it to convey imperialist, militarist, and patriarchal ideologies, artists could, in turn, "manipulate" history to communicate alternative democratic and anti-authoritarian visions – and perhaps, in the longer term, even inspire social change.

In this talk, I present *Street of Our Memory* (2019-2020), a performance I realized in the Arctic city of Norilsk. The work reactivated the memory of Soviet terror by guiding audiences through Sevastopolskaya Street – a central thoroughfare built by Gulag prisoners in the 1940s. While much of the original architecture was demolished in the 1980s, provoking public protest and nostalgic recollection, the performance connected this erasure to ongoing structures of violence in contemporary Russia. By foregrounding local memory and spatial experience, the project offered an embodied, independent engagement with suppressed histories.

**Tatiana Efrussi** is an artist and researcher based in Paris. She studied at the École des Beaux-Arts (Paris), Kassel University (PhD), and the Rodchenko School in Moscow. Her work engages with memory, architecture, and post-Soviet space through video, performance, and installation. Efrussi has exhibited across Europe, including at Garage Museum (Moscow), Tretyakov Gallery, Zarya CCA (Vladivostok), and



SINEMA TRANSTOPIA (Berlin). She has held residencies in Geneva, Yerevan, Paris, and Norilsk, and contributed to workshops at institutions such as the Garage Museum and Goethe-Institut.

**Maria Engström**

***The civilizational turn and metamodern recycling of the Soviet past in contemporary Russian visual culture***

My paper explores how Russian civilizational ideology is perpetuated in contemporary popular culture by focusing on the recycling of Soviet visuality in selected films, music videos, and video games from the last decade. The previous research on memory politics in contemporary Russia demonstrated that Putin's regime, especially since 2012, has been relying not on a clearly formulated state ideology, but on a state mythology that is expressed not only in official policies and documents, but in practically all spheres of culture. Russian symbolic and performative politics exert their influence through affect, heavily leaning on nostalgic discourses and civilizational myths. In political terms, myth effectively replaces the idea of linear progress and critical thinking with cyclical reaffirmation of the present order and history is replaced with mythological narratives. To better understand the mythologies of the Soviet past in contemporary Russia, two concepts are important for this study: the notion of *cultural recycling* and the theory of *metamodernism*.

**Maria Engström** is Professor of Russian at the Department of Modern Languages, Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research explores the contemporary Russian neoconservative intellectual milieu, imperial aesthetics in contemporary literature and art, late Soviet underground 'occulture', post-Soviet utopian imagination, and the role of the Orthodox Church in politics. She has published widely on issues of social in/visibilities, metamodernism and affect including as editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Her current project *No(w)stalgia of Modernity: Neo-Soviet Myth in Contemporary Russian Culture*, investigates the neo-Soviet myth as a complex aesthetic, ideological and commercial phenomenon.

**Kristian Feigelson**

***Filming the Gulag: between history and memory***

How is the Gulag represented in the former Soviet Union and Russia today?

While numerous books and studies describing the reality of daily life reality in the Soviet camps, paradoxically, very few films have examined the history and visual reality of the camps in Russia. This is due in part to the fact that "the Gulag" remains an administrative designation estranged from all concrete traces of the camps, which (unlike those of the Nazi system), have been erased from history despite the work done by *Memorial*. Rare documentaries, few fictional films and television series based on literary works about the Gulag have been produced in the former Soviet Union. But also abroad. Introducing this general context, we'd like to focus here on one film in particular, Marina Goldovskaya's *"The Power of the Solovki"* (1988), based in part on archive extracts from an early Soviet propaganda film, *"Slon"* (1927), promoting the benefits of re-education through labor at the Solovki camp. Following on from Shalamov's and Solzhenitsyn's writings on the camps, which had not yet been openly published in the USSR at that time, this first documentary film, *"The Power of the Solovkis"*, combines a critical visual analysis with the words of surviving victims to testify about the Solovki deportations. Gathering testimonies from deportees of this first labor camp in the USSR, *"The Power of the Solovkis"* was a real shock at the time of Perestroika: the film attracted over 15 million viewers, was shown on television and inaugurated a new era of witnessing before the birth of the *Memorial* association. Today Memorial is banned and most of the museums concerning this topic in Russia are closed. In this new context, how can we confront the written with the oral and visual culture of camp testimony? In post-Soviet Russia, where these questions have become mainly inaudible, how few films became nowadays essential for exploring the relationship between history and memory? Our paper will analyze these paradoxes concerning public testimonies, which have since spread the whole of post-Soviet society, divided between an impossible memory and a recreated visual imaginary of the camps.

**Kristian Feigelson** is Professor of Film Studies and a sociologist at Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris. His research focuses on the sociology of cinema, cultural industries, and the politics of representation,

with a regional focus on Russia and post-socialist societies. He has authored and edited numerous works on cinema and authoritarianism, artistic labour, and media history, and leads the research programme *Filming the Gulag*. A former visiting scholar in Washington, Berlin, and Tokyo, he has taught and lectured extensively across Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

**Alexey Izosimov**

***Imagining Alternative Pasts for a Better Future: Heritage and Memory Activism in Contemporary Russia***

In this presentation, I will introduce the phenomenon of heritage and memory activism in contemporary Russia – grassroots initiatives that reinterpret the past at the local level and offer alternative historical narratives.

Although the Russian state officially celebrates heritage and tradition as part of its conservative ideology, many of the projects analysed in this paper are not overtly political – with their creators often avoiding public statements – they can, nonetheless, act subversively. Generally, such initiatives aim to decentralise and reframe the state's narrative by shifting focus to local histories, everyday experiences, and marginalised voices. They foreground stories of communities and emphasise grassroots agency over narratives of great powers and heroic individuals.

In the first part of the talk, I will provide a working definition and typology of memory- and heritage-related projects in Russian regions, focusing on those that engage with pre-revolutionary and Soviet pasts, as well as their relationship to contemporary state historical narratives.

In the second part, I present several local case studies that exemplify different approaches to reframing established historical narratives. First, in the Vologda region, Anor Tukaeva's *Krokhino* project reimagines a semi-submerged church – flooded during the construction of a reservoir in 1964 – as both a museum and a beacon of memory for the drowned villages. Second, in Khabarovsk, activists addressed the absence of female representation in public space by erecting nine plywood monuments dedicated to local women. Third, in Ryazan, Nikita Girin's work, initially focused on commemorating 19th-century peasant resilience, evolved into a deep collaboration with the local community. One notable example is the re-enactment of the Day of the Village Constitution, a holiday once celebrated for almost a century until the late 1930s.

The presentation draws on my journalistic experience and collected materials as co-founder of the Russian-language media outlet *V Lesah*, which focuses on heritage activism and regional cultures in Russia. The paper aims to provide a framework for describing this emerging and little-known phenomenon and to open a space for further discussion.

**Alexey Izosimov** is a PhD candidate in Slavonic Studies at Clare College, University of Cambridge, focusing on the social and cultural history of restoration and preservation in late Soviet Russia. He holds an MA in Medieval Studies from Université Sorbonne (Paris). He was also an associate researcher at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig and a predoctoral research fellow at the Lotman Institute for Russian Culture at Ruhr University Bochum. Beyond his academic work, he is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *@vlesah*, a Russian-language media platform dedicated to heritage activism and the culture(s) of Russia's regions.

**Evgeniya Kondrashina**

***Reimagining the Past: The Role of Illustrations in the 2023 Official High School Textbooks on Russian and World History***

High school history textbooks serve as authoritative instruments in shaping students' worldviews and, by extension, the perspectives of future adult citizens. Throughout the 1990s, Russian and world history textbooks underwent extensive revisions, reflecting competing reinterpretations of historical events. Since 2014, however, textbook production has become increasingly centralised under the auspices of the Russian state and its Ministry of Education, which recognises the strategic power of

constructing a unified historical narrative and disseminating it nationwide. In 2023, Russia introduced a new set of mandatory high school history textbooks, covering both Russian and world history. These publications reflect the prevailing Cold War rhetoric, particularly in their opposition to 'the West,' thereby underscoring the renewed relevance of Carl Schmitt's 'friend-enemy' dichotomy. This paper employs semiotics and critical discourse analysis to investigate the illustrations in these textbooks, examining the ways in which they visually frame historical narratives and reinforce particular discursive constructions of the Soviet past. The study deconstructs how illustrations depict key historical events, including armed conflicts, and how they visually construct notions of 'the other.' It further explores the selective emphasis placed on specific aspects of Soviet history, interrogating the extent to which these visual strategies serve to legitimise and perpetuate contemporary ideological discourses. A particularly illuminating example is the representation of the respective roles of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Second World War. By identifying emergent discursive patterns within these textbooks, this paper seeks to assess their impact on shaping students' perceptions of history and national identity.

**Evgeniya Kondrashina** is a Lecturer at New York University (Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development). She has previously taught and managed research centres at the LSE and Goldsmiths College, London. Evgeniya holds a PhD and MA in Cultural Relations from Goldsmiths College (AHRC grant) and an undergraduate degree from the LSE. Her PhD research employed semiotics and critical discourse analysis to compare and contrast the cover art of Soviet and Western classical music records and their hidden and explicit messaging.

**Elizaveta Konovalova**  
***Svoboda. 1919. 2020.***  
***Recasting the Soviet Statue of Liberty***

This presentation unfolds around one of my artworks, completed in 2020. The title – *Svoboda. 1919. 2020* – refers to the so-called *Soviet Statue of Liberty* (*Rus. Svoboda*), which was installed in Moscow in 1919 as part of the Monument to the Soviet Constitution, and demolished in 1941.

The starting point for this work was the accidental discovery of a miniature replica of the monument, reproduced on the fence of a bridge in central Moscow. The original sculpture was barely recognisable beneath numerous layers of glossy black paint – its features blurred, its silhouette severely deformed. An elegant allegory of freedom had been reduced to a tiny, clumsy figure. In the context of the current political situation in Russia, these distortions have taken on new layers of meaning, creating an entirely different image.

I believe my desire to recast this monument today stems from two impulses: a gesture of resistance against the orchestrated erasure of this work, and a wish to offer a contemporary reinterpretation, in which the mutated Liberty acts as a kind of mirror of the repressive regime. The installation emphasizes these parallels by restoring the replica of the statue - spontaneously deformed over time - to its original monumental scale.

**Elizaveta Konovalova** (b. 1986, Moscow) is an artist and researcher based in Paris. Her practice interweaves fieldwork and documentary research to trace connections between specific situations and their wider historical and political frameworks. Working with found materials—both textual and visual—she constructs layered narratives, embodied in the forms that she elaborates by montage. Her work spans installations, film and photography-based projects, and site-specific interventions.

She studied at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, in the studio of Jean-Luc Vilmouth. From 2014 to 2018, she pursued a practice-based PhD within the SACRe program. Her doctoral research focused on the landscape of Kaliningrad—a Russian exclave in Eastern Europe, formerly part of East Prussia, annexed by the USSR after World War II. She successfully defended her PhD in 2018, presenting an exhibition and a publication titled *K*.

**Elena Konyushihina**  
***Visual Strategies of Representing the Soviet Past in Contemporary Russian Art***

Centred on Russian artists in exile who are critical of state-dominant narratives on Soviet history, this paper explores a visual counterculture that reflects independently on the conflicted past. Addressing the

Soviet architectural heritage—abandoned factories and secret laboratories—artists Pavel Otdelnov and Taisia Korotkova, reimagine Soviet space. In so doing, they address lesser-known, small-scale histories of the post-WWII period. Often, erased, forgotten or distorted peripheral narratives are the main reference for the artists explored in this study.

I argue that they recreate the Soviet presence, each using its own particular methodology: Pavel Otdelnov's documentary investigation on site in a secret laboratory, and Taisia Korotkova's imaginary fairytale forest. This study particularly analyses visual practices across various media—large-scale paintings graphics, textile, and photography—created during the early 2020s, in a time when creative and critical reflection on the Soviet past was tolerated, which has now closed.

**Elena Konyushihina** is a PhD candidate at The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, as well as an art writer and curator. Her writing has appeared in *Moscow Art Magazine*, *Art Focus Now*, and *Iskusstvo*, and she was formerly a correspondent for *The Art Newspaper Russia*. A Chevening Fellow (2018-2019), she holds degrees from Goldsmiths, University of London, and Lomonosov Moscow State University. Selected curatorial projects include *Voices* (A3 Gallery, Moscow, 2015), *The Family Archive* (Theater am Steg, Baden, Austria, 2018), and *About Me, Please, About Me* (25Kadr Gallery, Moscow, 2018).

**Anastasiia Korableva**

### ***Shaping Patriotic Identities: Propaganda Murals in Today's Russia***

This presentation examines how historical memory is instrumentalised in Russian public spaces, focusing on the role of patriotic urban art in shaping collective perceptions from the early 2010s to the present. It explores two key strategies: the reinterpretation of historical events through themes of strength and heroism, and the celebration of prominent figures as a means of reinforcing Russia's cultural, scientific, and geopolitical significance.

As one of the most visible and accessible forms of contemporary art today, large-scale outdoor murals emerge in this context as a powerful tool for embedding ideology into the everyday visual environment. Drawing on such artworks created by different actors—from state-affiliated platforms and pseudo-grassroots movements to independent artists—as primary case studies, the presentation will demonstrate how the two aforementioned strategies are enacted in practice. Examples discussed will include reinterpretations of the Great Patriotic War that lend support to contemporary political narratives; recontextualisations of well-known symbols intended to foster loyalty to the state; and adaptations of pop-cultural references as a way to reinforce patriotic messages.

By unpacking contemporary visual culture in this way, this research aims to illuminate the broader mechanisms through which identity and memory are mobilised within the ideological frameworks of present-day Russia. It ultimately offers insight into how informal channels of creative expression can function as subtle yet potent instruments of ideological control—and, in doing so, invites reflection on effective strategies of resistance.

**Anastasiia Korableva** is a PhD candidate in Art History and Theory at the University of Essex (Colchester, UK). Her doctoral research explores text-based street art as a form of resistance in contemporary Russia, with a focus on the contrast between illegal artistic interventions and state-driven creative propaganda. Anastasiia has contributed to a range of cultural projects and published with academic and artistic communities in Russia and abroad. She is currently preparing a chapter on street art in Russia for the forthcoming volume *Street Art and Democracy*, to be published by Routledge in 2026.

**Andrea Liu**

### ***What is Russian About Russian Cosmism?***

During fin-de-siècle Russia, seething with intense intellectual controversy, rising militarism, and scientific advancement, Nikolai Fedorov yearned to achieve universal brotherhood through his "Common Task". With a Promethean utopianism, Fedorov propounded that evolution is only complete when

humans defeat death—a task he startlingly proposed would be attained not during Christianity’s “Last Judgment,” but instead through technology. Immortality is both a goal and prerequisite of the future communist society Fedorov envisioned, with a post-mortal circulation of bodies (with immortality of the soul replaced by immortality of the body, as extended by science). Other 19th century luminaries like Vladimir Solovyov, Vladimir Vernadsky, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Pavel Florensky, Alexander Chizhevsky, Valerian Muraviev (amongst them scientists, philosophers, and religious men) were eventually grouped with Fedorov under the rubric of “Russian cosmism” by Svetlana Semenova in the mid-1970’s.

An implicit hagiography underlay this 5 year efflorescence of cosmism-related art and cultural production: cosmism was lauded for its intermediality (effortless interpenetration of disciplines); for Fedorov’s stalwart rejection of teleological time to, instead, posit time as a multidirectional landscape; for Cosmism’s influence on constructivism/productivism, whereby a work of art is not mere commodity fetish but a microcosm for building a new world. Forgotten was Fedorov’s support for the Tsar or the integral role Russian Orthodox Christianity played in his revolutionary millenarism; forgotten was cosmism’s troubling bridge to the present day *prima facie* movement of neoliberalism: transhumanism and its hyper capital-intensive shenanigans for life extension, à la Elon Musk. This paper looks at the politics of what was remembered and what was forgotten about cosmism during this 5 year re-staging of cosmism and probes the question: what is “Russian” about Russian cosmism? Were certain strains of national identity consolidated or foregrounded within this renaissance of Russian cosmism?

**Andrea Liu** is a New York/Berlin/Paris-based art and performance critic whose research engages genealogy and epistemic frameworks in art production. She received her undergrad education at Yale University and curated *Counterhegemony: Art in a Social Context* CAC Vilnius. A fellow of the Center for Experimental Museology, Banff Centre, Houston and Zurich University of the Arts, she has given talks at institutions including Goldsmiths, Yale, and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Her writing appears in *e-flux*, *ArtMargins*, *Social Text*, and *Afterimage*.

**Jade McGlynn**

***An old history for a new future: Russian historical destruction and propaganda in the occupied territories.***

This presentation examines how Russia weaponises historical narratives and cultural symbols to entrench its occupation of Ukrainian territories, with a particular focus on Mariupol, Melitopol, and Crimea. By imposing selective memory frameworks, Russia seeks to erase Ukrainian identity and replace it with an imperial Russian historical imaginary. This process is not merely ideological; it is systematically enforced through the destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage, the imposition of Russian educational curricula, and the strategic use of monuments and symbols to reshape collective memory.

Drawing on case studies, this presentation explores how these dynamics unfold in occupied regions. In Mariupol, a statue of Alexander Pushkin now stands in Primorskyi Park over unmarked graves of civilians killed by Russian forces—an act that both commemorates and legitimises occupation through cultural symbolism. In Melitopol, libraries have been systematically purged of Ukrainian books, while Russian history textbooks glorifying imperial narratives have replaced Ukrainian educational materials. In Crimea, policies of enforced Russification since 2014—including the suppression of Crimean Tatar cultural heritage—serve as a blueprint for similar efforts in newly occupied regions.

This analysis underscores how historical narratives are not passively inherited but actively constructed and imposed as instruments of power. By examining the performative and visual aspects of Russia’s historical interventions, this presentation will demonstrate how the occupation is not only territorial but also epistemic—aimed at ensuring that a different past is remembered in the future, one in which Ukraine is but a spectre, and Russian imperial dominance is uncontested.

**Jade McGlynn** is a Leverhulme Early Career Researcher in the War Studies Department at King’s College London. She holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford, where she also lectured in Russian. Her research focuses on Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories and societal attitudes towards the war in Ukraine, including through fieldwork in eastern Ukraine. A fluent Russian speaker, she has lived and worked across Russia and contributes regularly to international media including the BBC, CNN, DW, *Foreign Policy*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Spectator*.



**Cristina Moraru**

***Counter-Memories and Alternative Narratives: Artistic Interventions in Soviet Histories***

In contemporary Russia, where state narratives dominate historical discourse, independent artistic practices serve as crucial sites of resistance and reinterpretation. This paper explores how contemporary visual culture critically engages with Soviet history, challenging historical amnesia, selective memory, and nostalgia to construct alternative narratives. By reimagining the past, artists disrupt state-controlled mythmaking and offer pluralistic perspectives on historical events.

Artists working within and beyond Russia deploy archival interventions, performative acts, and multimedia installations to expose suppressed histories. Some revisit personal and familial memories, juxtaposing them against official narratives to foreground the fractures and silences in Soviet historiography. Others employ reenactment and re-staging as a means to rearticulate historical events, highlighting inconsistencies in state-sponsored retellings. These artistic interventions foster a multidirectional memory landscape, countering the linear and monolithic portrayals of Soviet history propagated by the Russian state.

One striking example is the work of Russian artist Yevgeny Fiks, whose project "Moscow" (2013) interrogates Soviet queer history. Fiks maps out hidden LGBTQ+ histories within Soviet-era Moscow, reclaiming erased narratives through archival research, photography, and performative interventions in public spaces. By bringing attention to stories deliberately omitted from the official Soviet past, Fiks challenges both historical and contemporary state narratives that continue to marginalize these communities. His work exemplifies how artists can use visual culture to recover suppressed histories and contest the state's ideological control over memory.

Similarly, documentary photography and experimental film serve as mediums to recover erased histories and give voice to marginalized narratives, resisting the totalizing effects of state-controlled memory. Artists transform abandoned Soviet-era sites into arenas of dialogue, subverting their original ideological functions and repurposing them as platforms for critical reflection. By reclaiming the past through independent artistic expression, these practices resist the weaponization of history and cultivate a space for dissent. This paper aligns with Session 2: Alternative Histories, demonstrating how visual culture challenges dominant frameworks and fosters new ways of understanding Soviet memory beyond state control.

**Cristina Moraru** is a researcher, curator, and editor based in Iași, Romania. She lectures in critical theory at George Enescu National University of the Arts and is a researcher on exhibition histories at ICMA. She co-edits *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication*, co-founded the Centre of Contemporary Photography in Iași, and is a member of AICA. She has participated in international residencies, research programmes, and workshops across Europe and North America.

**Natalia Tikhonova**

***The processes of militarisation and weaponization of Russian Society through culture, religion and the land politic.***

In the book "Empire, Colony, Postcolony," Robert J.C. Young interrogates how colonial technologies exist not only as technical tools but also as facets of modernity that shape presence from both sides. In the case of Putin's Russia, such important technologies have manifested in global militarization, embodied in the monoangular idea of "fear-security-army," which can also be translated as "imitation-presence-protection." The symbolic infiltration of the military into various aspects of life, including language and media, can be described as the weaponization of different social and political activities. These "technologies" encompass not only arms and military tactics but, are realized also for example through art, religion, and public security. In my presentation, I aim to provide an overview of the examples and tools used as soft power to shape truth politics amid militarization, illustrating artificial sublime protection through examples from art, religion, and land politics.

Examples abound of how these tropes intertwine within political and propaganda strategies, leveraging each other's resources for advancement and development.



Militarism and art share a historical connection, evident in traditions like battle paintings that persist within academic institutions. This connection extends to contemporary practices outside institutions, including artists' visits to sites like Palmyra since the beginning of Russian military activity in Syria. This tendency continues with collaborations between militarization and museums and their public leaders, such as Piotrovsky, including not only the facts of robbing occupied Museums on the territory of Ukraine but also their public reflections and statements.

Through these and other examples based on comprehensive research from mass media from 2000 to 2022, I aim to explore the intricate dynamics between militarism and the weaponization of contemporary Russian society through art, religion, ecology, and other important social and political narratives. By uncovering shared logics and methodologies through all these narratives as art and environmental protection, termed "technologies of presence," I seek to illuminate how these colonial technologies developed and influenced one another in the context of modern Russia.

**Natalia Tikhonova** is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, and media researcher based in Hamburg, with a background in IT, cultural research, and activism. Her work explores Russian colonialism, militarisation, and infrastructures of resistance. She completed her MA in Curatorial Studies at Smolny and Bard Colleges in 2019. Her curatorial practice spans nomadic and digital formats, with projects for Garage Museum and the NCCA. Since 2022, she has contributed to mutual aid initiatives supporting Ukrainians affected by the Russian invasion, including Friends of Mariupol and Oleshi SOS.

**Ana Zadora**

*Refracting Soviet Memories in Belarus.*

Belarus, co-aggressor in the Russian war against the Ukraine is a specific case of past manipulation and some researchers qualify Belarus is a laboratory for history re-writing for Russia. In post-Soviet Belarus, the use of historical heritage in order to legitimize discourse about the past, present and future based on the Second World War is a specific phenomenon.

The Great Patriotic War Museum is a symbolic place in the center of Minsk, which is a must-see for all Belarusian schoolchildren from 1944.

On the 3rd of July 2014th a new Second World War museum was inaugurated by Belarusian and Russian presidents. The museum provides for the use of cutting edge media technology to reconstruct the history of the events of the Second World War. The museum uses new technologies : 3D films etc., interactive devices allowing to express emotions during the visit, to light a digital memory candle... According to official statistics and to the testimony of the Museum's director, the museum attracts many visitors without "advertising" campaign.

The roof of the Museum reproduces the Reichstag's roof with the red Soviet flag.

The central hall situated under the cupola is "The Hall of the Heirs of Great Victory". The hall is devoted to Belarusians who took part at international and local conflicts after the WWII (Afghanistan, Chechnya...). The official message indicates : "The hall shows role and significance of power structures - the Heirs of the Great Victory - to ensure the national security of Belarus". The central and the biggest photo shows Loukachenko wearing the uniform of Supreme Commander at the parade of Victory. Such parallels serve to legitimate an authoritarian and Russian-orientated regime.

The use of memory becomes a source of justification for the Belarusian regime, which cannot find legitimacy through the classic democratic mechanisms, like transparent elections, developed civil society.

2005 was marked by the opening of the «Stalin Line» museum in the Minsk region, one of the 28 fortifications built in the USSR in 1928 and 1939.

The visit is part of the school program, so students have a mandatory assignment to make after the visit:

an essay, an oral presentation, some teachers invite to collect the testimonies of family members of students who have lived the war or suggest to make a drawing inspired by the visit.

Political injunctions that emphasize the importance of this event and build on the power of proximity can be in conflict with personal experience of the reconstructed historical phenomenon. The approach is that of a "pedagogy by emotion". Students are invited to "experience" the visit. They are invited to imagine themselves instead, to reflect on the motivation of young people who sacrificed their lives for the Homeland during the war.

Students are invited to co-construct the visit, to express themselves, to write virtual messages to the children of war, to the children in the concentration camps, to light a virtual candle in memory of the victims also addressing graphic and textual messages.

The exclusively heroic discourse on war that must be transmitted by the educational system and experienced and appropriate in the museum space lies between acceptance, rejection and indifference. Acceptance is the easiest, most obvious option, given the pressure of the context, the public space, the education system and the family that does not oppose the official discourse. What's more, the heroism that goes through identification with war heroes or the game to heroes corresponds to the need for positive identification «keep face» in terms of Erving Goffman.

The importance of the hybridization of the registers and the active participation that the political authorities want of the young generation in the process of patrimonialization can be seen in the construction of the Belarusian "Disneyland" – Stalin's line, "extension" of the war museum. It is a war museum park that mobilizes disconnected, almost playful registers. The visits are designed for families where they can see and use weapons, taste the mythical porridge of soldiers, adults «taste» traditional vodka. There are concerts of war songs, workshops of drawing and construction of carpets of machines of war, it is possible to climb in trains and tanks of the time. There is even the video game contest for different ages of the game created by the Belarusian «World of Tanks» with a worldwide success. The authorities are sensitive to the expectations of visitors and especially younger ones to better conserve the heritage and its political uses, to make injunctions natural and non-binding. However, if acceptance dominates, refusal to identify with the official narrative is also an option. There may be many reasons.

Finally, the most common posture is that of indifference, minimal acceptance without real adherence, where students assimilate the official message without giving it any importance.

The exhibition does not interest these children, they seek only the playful side, absent within the museum, allow themselves jokes that may seem inappropriate in the face of suffering, death... Even the quiz designed for family visits leaves them indifferent.

They prefer the Stalin line or video games about war ("World of Tanks" created by Belarussian developers is a worldwide success), but without any reflection and personal posture.

The Belarusian authorities have invested considerably in maintaining the sacralizing message about war and the glory of victory.

**Ana Zadora** is a sociologist of education and political scientist, with a habilitation from the University of Corsica and a PhD from the University of Strasbourg. Their research focuses on education, identity, and historical memory in post-Soviet and European contexts. They are a leading expert for the Council of Europe Observatory on History Teaching and have held visiting roles at Sapienza (Rome), UBC (Vancouver), and Lund University. Their work has received support from UNESCO, COST, and the European Commission.

# Panel Chair Biographies

**Professor Sarah Wilson** is an art historian and curator specialising in post-war and contemporary European art, Franco-Soviet relations and post-Soviet art. Educated at Oxford and the Courtauld, where she has taught for many years, she co-developed the MA course *Global Conceptualism* with Boris Groys. She has held senior teaching posts in Paris, including a chaire d'excellence at the Université de Versailles-Saint Quentin. In 1997, she was named Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. Her key publications include *Paris, Capital of the Arts 1900-1968* (Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2002), *Picasso, Marx and socialist realism in France* (Liverpool University Press, 2013) and *The Visual World of French Theory 1, Figurations* (Yale University Press, 2010, Presses du réel, 2018).

**Ella Rossman** is a PhD candidate at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Her academic interests include women's and gender history and the history of state socialism and postsocialism. Her research was published in *Gender&History*, *Ab Imperio*, *History of Science and Humanities*, *New Perspectives*, and others. She wrote op-eds for *Novaya Gazeta*, *Meduza*, *openDemocracy*, and *Riddle*.

**Dr Michał Murawski** is an anthropologist of architecture and cities at UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies. His research explores the afterlives of socialist-era buildings and the relationship between architecture, politics, ecology, and violence in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. He is the author of *The Palace Complex* (Indiana University Press, 2019) and *A Form of Friendship: The Museum on the Square* (Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; Chicago UP 2024). His forthcoming book, *Only to Hell* (MIT Press, 2026), examines Russia's construction complex as a system of domination. In 2025, he co-curated Ukraine's pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

**Dr Elena Zaytseva** is an independent art historian with extensive experience in contemporary exhibition-making in Russia and the UK. A former Associate Curator at Pushkin House, London, and previously at the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (2003-2007), she has developed major exhibitions, biennial projects, and public programmes across institutional and independent spaces. She holds a PhD from the Research Institute of Theory and History of Fine Arts, Moscow, and an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London. She is co-editor of *Cosmic Shift: Russian Contemporary Art Writing* (Zed Books, 2017), and her practice spans photography, museums, and curatorial education.

**Dr Alma Prelec** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Her doctoral thesis, *Travelling Players, Travelling Civil Wars: Theatrical exchange between Spain and the former Yugoslavia*, was awarded the 2025 Association of Hispanists' dissertation prize and is the basis of her first monograph, forthcoming with Legenda (Oxford).

**Dr Dzmitry Suslau** is Lecturer at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, where he designed and leads the module *Contemporary Art and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*. He is the founding director and curator of Climate Art, an initiative exploring the intersections of contemporary art and environmental politics. His research focuses on public art, memory, and national identity in post-socialist spaces, with publications in the *London Review of Books*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and *Journal of Belarusian Studies*. His doctoral thesis is called *Between Public Art and the Monument* (UCL, 2022).

**Notes:**

