

2024

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Recommended Citation

Klaits, Nathan (2024) "Punk and Perestroika: Voicing Resistance at the End of the USSR," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 15, Article 6.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol15/iss1/6>

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Siberian punk band, Grazhdanskaya Oborona (GrOb). Founded in 1984, the band broke up in 1990 due to growing mainstream appeal and the end of totalitarian Soviet discourse. The liberal atmosphere of the Soviet Union during perestroika undercut GrOb's ability to voice criticism. Commercialization as well as a broadening audience also diluted the band's message and eventually caused it to break up. Referring to fanzines, interviews, and scholarly research, the paper presents the struggle of GrOb, as well as the Siberian punk scene more broadly, to voice criticism as rock commercialized and the authoritarian discourse of the mid 1980s broke down.

Introduction

Grazhdanskaya Oborona, translating to “Civil Defense,” was one of the pioneers of Soviet punk rock. Led by its fiery frontman, Egor Letov, Grazhdanskaya Oborona—often abbreviated to GrOb—attracted fans with its poetic lyrics and powerful vocals. GrOb stood out in Soviet rock in that its members were from the working-class Siberian city of Omsk, while the other big names of Soviet rock like Kino, Aquarium, and Zvuki Mu were based out of the cosmopolitan cities of Moscow and Leningrad. During its thirty-four-year history, the band straddled several key eras of Soviet and Russian history. GrOb was founded in 1984 during the period of “developed socialism” in the USSR. This era was defined by the stagnation of many sectors of Soviet life, including the government and economy. In 1986, *perestroika* [restructuring] began, bringing rapid social, political, and cultural change to the country. Due to this sudden shift, by the late-1980s GrOb was operating in a dramatically different sociocultural environment. The challenge of remaining not only relevant but subversive—the principle GrOb had been founded on—proved to be the band's undoing. In 1990, at the height of its popularity, Grazhdanskaya Oborona broke up.

At the beginning of GrOb's history in the mid-1980s, the band was under intense scrutiny from the state. Its songs contained overtly anti-Soviet lyrics and they embraced the term "punk"—a genre Soviet censors deemed decadent and Western. All this made the band a target of surveillance and interference from the KGB (Yurchak, 2006; Kozlov, 2014). GrOb's music was recorded in band members' apartments and distributed through underground channels. They often performed in basements or university classrooms. Their music was loud, thrashing, and not particularly sophisticated. Importantly, though, this was exactly how Egor Letov, their frontman, liked it. He insisted the true content of his music was in the lyrics, not the sound. His goal was to communicate the experience of living in a totalitarian state, and to challenge that state in the process (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Alongside GrOb, an entire Siberian punk movement exploded in the mid-1980s. Its members were students, the unemployed, or simply young people with nothing better to do. Siberian punk sought to give voice to the frustration many young people felt living in the final years of the Soviet Union. The state stifled their voices, and punk was a way of not only channeling their frustration but challenging the state as well. Later, the meaning and efficacy of this challenge would be thrown into doubt as the restrictive, state-controlled world of "developed socialism" ended, and perestroika began. By 1991, GrOb and most of the other Siberian punk bands had disbanded, at a time when it seemed that the genre was on the cutting edge of Soviet rock. In this paper, I will demonstrate how the liberalization and marketization of the USSR led to the undoing of Siberian punk. In examining the abrupt end of GrOb and Siberian punk, we gain an understanding of how subcultures struggle when the conditions in which they arise are altered, and more broadly, the limits of music's ability to shape society.

Perestroika Punk

At the beginning of 1988, Siberian punk was thriving. Aside from GrOb, bands like Putti, Instruksiya po Vyzhivaniyu, Kulturnaya Revolutsiya, and many others had formed over the past few years. Rock clubs were opening in far-flung cities like Novosibirsk, and the scene was even garnering attention from the established rock institutions in Moscow and Leningrad (Meynert, 1987; Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). It seemed the future was bright for Siberian punk, but by 1991 the scene had disappeared. Bands were breaking up, one of the scene's most promising musicians, Yanka Dyagileva, had passed away, and GrOb, once the most prolific group in Siberian punk, had disbanded.

It is no coincidence that Siberian punk's sudden decline coincided with the collapse of the USSR. The liberal atmosphere of the Soviet Union's final years propelled Siberian punk to greater popularity, but also required it to become a marketable commodity. The system that had forced Letov and other musicians into the shadows now sought to profit off their success. While in 1985, the KGB had forced Letov into a mental institution, by 1988 GrOb was performing at festivals organized by Komsomol, the Communist Party's youth wing (Banev, 1989). The years 1988–1990 also represented

the peak of GrOb's creative output. Letov produced several albums a year during that period and performed at festivals from Novosibirsk to Tallinn. Yet despite a sudden burst in popularity, the content of GrOb's music—the message that Letov insisted was the whole point of rock—didn't appeal to a new cohort of fans. During the late 1980s the members of GrOb often complained of hooliganism at their concerts and their new fans' indifference towards the band's lyrics (Herbert, 1990). The openness of perestroika propelled GrOb to new fame, but perestroika's capitalist reforms commodified it as well. Due to the changing social and political climate, Grazhdanskaya Oborona broke up in 1990 (Herbert, 2019).

At the beginning of 1988, it wasn't clear the repression that had characterized GrOb's early years would end as a result of perestroika. Just a few months earlier in April 1987 at a rock festival in Novosibirsk, Letov had performed in a band named "Adolf Hitler," and a warrant was issued for his arrest. Letov later remarked that this had been a way to thumb his nose at the state-run newspapers in Omsk that had "slung mud" at GrOb and labeled them fascist (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Unsurprisingly, "Adolf Hitler's" performance was poorly received by authorities. Letov always sought to push the boundaries of acceptability in the USSR, and as a result Letov along with his partner and bandmate, Yanka Dyagileva were forced on the run. For the next several months the pair traveled the country performing in basements and crashing on couches (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). This episode reflects the uneasy relationship between authorities and punk during the early days of perestroika. The fact that Komsomol organized a punk festival at all shows a certain willingness on the part of authorities to tolerate punk. Still, party officials weren't ready to relinquish all their methods of discursive control. There were still lines, and in 1987, Letov crossed them.

Undeterred by this brush with the law, Letov recorded three albums in 1988: *Tak Zakalyalas Ctal* [So the Steel is Tempered], *Vsyo Idyot po Planu* [Everything Is Going to Plan], and *Boevoi Stimul* [Battle Incentive] (Grazhdanskaya Oborona [GrOb], 1988; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). The records represented GrOb's continuing evolution. Sonically, the melodies on the tracks were more developed, there was less distortion than in earlier projects, and the production quality was noticeably improved. Letov's lyrics retained their vivid imagery and anti-Soviet messaging, but they more explicitly referenced political figures and movements. On "Iuda Budet v Rayu" [Judas will be in Heaven] and "Anarkhiya" [Anarchy], Letov referred to the famous anarchist leader Nestor Makhno and claimed anarchy to be his cause (GrOb, 1989a; GrOb, 1988b; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). The title track of *Vsyo Idyot po Planu*—one of GrOb's most famous songs—referred directly to Lenin, perestroika, and Kim Il-Sung. In the song, Letov sang with his characteristic sarcasm of the failures of perestroika and the Soviet project generally: "When communism comes everything will be fucked up/It's coming soon, you only have to wait/Everything will be free there, everything will be bliss/Maybe you won't even have to die there" (GrOb, 1988c). GrOb had always been political,

but starting in 1988 and continuing through 1990, their anti-Soviet politics became more explicit than ever.

At the same time as GrOb was growing in popularity in 1987 and 1988, the Siberian punk scene as a whole was enjoying greater attention as well. Musicians began playing larger venues, and in the summer of 1988, Siberian punk organized one of its first large events, the Festival of Alternative and Left Radical Music, in the city of Tyumen (Banev, 1989). All the big names in Siberian punk performed, including GrOb. The musicians remembered the event as a success, despite the presence of KGB and Komsomol officials. One performer, Yevgeny Kuznetsov, noted that the authorities in the city of Sverdlovsk had been much more lenient than the ones at the Tyumen festival (Herbert, 2019). Examples like this suggest an uneasy relationship between Siberian punk and the state in the late 1980s. It seems that communist officials themselves weren't sure where the lines stood any longer, so that it was possible for punks to perform comfortably in one city and not another. The fanzine *Tusovka* [Party] published a dispatch from the festival, painting a picture of a haphazard event organized by both Siberian punks and Komsomol members (Banev, 1989; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). The report also records a moment where a Moscow-based band offered to perform for 200 rubles. The organizers refused, insisting on keeping their event "non-commercial" (Banev, 1989; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Siberian punks were committed to offering an open platform for speech, and they seemed to have understood that commercialism threatened their ability to do so. Over the following few years, the growing Soviet music industry would become an existential threat for the Siberian punk movement and everything it stood for.

The Tyumen festival encapsulated Siberian punk's identity. It was haphazard, open, and interested largely in the content of its music rather than making a profit. The scene had thrived in the restrictive world of the pre-perestroika USSR, but it faced a forced reinvention in the Soviet Union's shifting political landscape. In the late 1980s, censorship was ending and the economy was liberalizing, meaning that bands like GrOb had the opportunity to market themselves and leave the underground world of basement venues and do-it-yourself recording.

Siberian Punk & Soviet Rock

Rock music was popular in the USSR beginning in at least the 1970s, and in the early 1980s the Soviet rock scene gained acceptance from state organs. By 1983, nearly every Komsomol newspaper had a column on rock music, informing fans about popular bands and upcoming events (Troitsky, 1987). In 1989, GrOb's music was circulating widely throughout the USSR and was even drawing attention from punk circles in Europe (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). The established Soviet rock scene based in the big cities of Moscow and Leningrad, took notice of the band, and in 1989, GrOb agreed to join the Leningrad Rock Club, signaling the band's arrival into the mainstream of Soviet rock (Herbert, 2019). The

Leningrad Rock Club was a state-sanctioned venue, one of many ways in which censors exercised some degree of control over a music genre they distrusted. By joining the club, GrOb was entering a far more established environment than the basement venues of Omsk and Novosibirsk.

Letov chose to relocate the band to Leningrad partly because of the perceived commercialism of the studio they were working with in Novosibirsk as well as the reputation of Leningrad-based music producer Sergey Firsov (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Firsov was known for increasing the reach of independent bands like GrOb, and for working with bands that had what Letov saw as “non-commercial potential” (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Ironically, it seems that by moving GrOb to the big city, Letov thought he was returning the band to its roots. However, Letov quickly came to see a gulf between the Siberian and Leningrad scenes. He told an interviewer in 1990 that he didn’t think anyone in Leningrad was making particularly good music, and that 80 percent of the club’s members had little interest in GrOb’s approach (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate).

Letov wanted to bring his music to a larger audience, but also appreciated that some of GrOb’s appeal came from the fact it was underground and that its music was rough around the edges. When it came time to record new music in 1989, Letov left the professional recording studios of Leningrad and returned to Omsk. Looking back on the decision, Letov commented: “I realized that with good recording quality, something very important is lost from what we put in... Now four albums have been recorded at my house. Very dirty, tough and lively. I think that’s how it should be” (Pobokov, 1990; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Letov understood much of GrOb’s appeal came from the fact that it had no connections to established institutions. The music literally came from his living room. In an environment where professionally released music was carefully vetted by state censors, GrOb’s authenticity held great appeal for fans. At the same time, Letov wanted his music and messaging to be accessible to as many people as possible. These contradicting demands resulted in a crisis for GrOb. In the end, the band was never able to find a way to be both accessible to a wide audience and authentic to itself. While Letov disliked the commercial direction GrOb was headed in, he never found a way to return the band to its roots.

The music that resulted from GrOb’s return to Omsk in 1989 is often thought of as its best. The band was facing a crisis in terms of its direction, but it clearly had plenty of creative potential left to tap. *Russkoe Pole Eksperimentov* [Russian Field of Experiments] in particular is celebrated as one of the best albums in GrOb’s quarter-century long discography (GrOb, 1989a; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). The album’s final track was also its title track—a fourteen minute epic that referenced the Bible, Russian literature and proverbs, all while touching on themes of ecological destruction and suicide (GrOb, 1989a; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). Sonically, the band reached new heights with the album. Letov’s voice, the thrashing guitar, and pounding drums and bass all hit a perfect bal-

ance. Another 1989 album, *Zdorovo i Vечно* [Great and Eternal], hit similar highs. On one of the most famous tracks, “Moya Oborona” [My Defense], Letov portrayed the world around him as plastic and lifeless. Letov’s “defense” in the song was his music, which he called “reflections of light on a glass eye” (GrOb, 1989c; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). As enduring as these songs have become, the lyrics suggest a frustration with GrOb’s inability to affect society as Letov would have liked. The “defense” Letov sings about is nothing more than a small piece of authenticity in an otherwise “plastic world.”

At the time of these albums’ composition GrOb was experiencing a meteoric rise in popularity while facing far less persecution than during its early days. Despite that, the music of 1989 was some of GrOb’s most pessimistic. Perestroika didn’t offer promise to Letov, only hypocrisy. It seemed the more idealistic Mikhail Gorbachev’s aspirations became, the more Letov insisted on the impossibility of those dreams. On tracks like “Moya Oborona,” Letov also doubted whether his own music could make an impact. In an October 1989 interview, he declared that rock’s evolution in the USSR was over, and that it’d devolved into pop music (RIO, 1989; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). In February 1990 at a memorial concert, Letov attacked critic Artemy Troitsky by name on stage for turning rock “into a bunch of shit” (RIO, 1989; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). This episode reflects Letov’s personal frustrations more so than any failing on the part of Troitsky. The trends in Soviet rock, and society more broadly, couldn’t be changed by any single individual. Rock music in the Soviet Union was quickly becoming a business, try as Letov might to prevent it.

While writing on GrOb’s history in 1995, Letov came to see the irony in this period of the band’s history. From an outside perspective GrOb had achieved all it could ask for by 1990. It was well-connected within Soviet rock, popular across the whole USSR, and no longer operating under the threat of imprisonment. Yet at the same time Letov was unsatisfied. In a way, it was persecution he’d sought all along. He wrote:

The fact is that I have always had a desire to bring the situation to the limit, to the moment when you are threatened with death. To ensure that reality itself...took active steps to destroy you. For only in this state can you check whether you really are worth something. (Letov, 1995; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate)

GrOb’s initial project had been to push the authoritarian boundaries of the pre-perestroika Soviet Union, not to liberalize the economy and not to achieve democracy. The creep of capitalism into society at large, let alone the rock world, was never what GrOb was after (Letov, 1995; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate).

To compound GrOb’s difficulties, the audiences that thronged to the band’s concerts in the big cities of Moscow and Leningrad valued them for their energetic performance on stage rather than the content of their lyrics. One music critic wrote that at GrOb’s

first concert in Moscow it had been difficult to make out the words being sung but that the band had a “powerful energy” the audience was receptive to (Herbert, 2019, p. 60). Oleg Sudakov, a member of GrOb, said that under these circumstances performers had to embrace their roles as entertainers or else give up performing entirely (Herbert, 2019). Letov chose the latter option. On April 13, 1990, Grazhdanskaya Oborona concluded a concert in Tallinn, Estonia with a raucous rendition of “Vsyo Idyot Po Planu.” Afterwards, Letov returned to Omsk, leaving rock and the audience he’d built behind (GrOb, 1996; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate). For the next few years he worked on an avant-garde project, Kommunizm [Communism] and a side project called Egor i Opadevenshie [Egor and the Pissed Off]. The music was made and released with little fanfare. Letov told Oleg Tarasov, the owner of a record company, to tell anyone who asked about him in Moscow and Leningrad that he was dead (Kozlov, 2014).

Other Siberian punks found themselves just as frustrated as Letov was. Many prided themselves on the scene’s intellectualism. Roman Neumoev of the band Instruksiya po Vyzhivaniyu noted that Siberian punks didn’t wear riveted jackets or mohawks in the hopes that audiences would focus on the content of the performance rather than the appearance of it—yet more and more it was the aesthetic that audiences came to see, and bands felt unappreciated (Kozlov, 2014). Other bands chafed at the growing commercialism in rock. Artists were offered money by Komsomol officials to perform in various cities, but for musicians like Artur Strukov of the punk band Kulturnaya Revolutsiya, performing intensely personal songs up to three times a day was unthinkable (Kozlov, 2014). Soviet rock required entertainers, and Siberian punks refused to fill that role. In response to the demands many bands either went on hiatus or broke up entirely.

Conclusion

Although the Siberian punk scene was gone in many respects by 1990, its symbolic death didn’t come until May 1991 with the suicide of Yanka Dyagileva. Dyagileva had dated Egor Letov and performed in Grazhdanskaya Oborona for a time, but she was also an accomplished artist in her own right. She had a powerful voice and stage presence, and she was especially renowned for the poeticism of her lyrics. Several famous Soviet rock musicians died at a young age, including solo artist Aleksander Bashlachev and Kino frontman Viktor Tsoi. Taken together, the premature loss of so many bright artists casts this era in a tragic light. Coupled with the rapid commercialization and sterilization of the music industry, the deaths of these musicians is closely associated with the end of this rebellious, subversive era of music. In the case of Siberian punk, the loss of such a vibrant and talented artist in Yanka Dyagileva came to symbolize the nail in Siberian punk’s coffin (O’Cyc, 1989; translated from the original Russian with Google Translate).

The transformation of Soviet rock during perestroika and the subsequent collapse of Siberian punk challenges a straightforward understanding of the last years of the

USSR. The perestroika reforms were a welcome change for many aspects of Soviet society, but it also endangered the subcultures that had grown and thrived in the old totalitarian system. Although the state repressed Siberian punk before perestroika, the limits it enforced allowed the scene to cultivate a dedicated audience that appreciated artists on their own terms. Commercialization and the end of censorship broke that tight-knit community apart. In studying the collapse of the Soviet Union, a time of sudden openness and opportunity, one should acknowledge the subcultures and movements that were left behind, as well as the ones that blossomed.

Letov devoted years of his life, and at times risked his safety, bringing GrOb's songs to the world. All this was done in the hopes that the "idea" of his music would reach people and change the Soviet Union for the better. While the USSR underwent radical change during this era, it wasn't because of GrOb. In fact, the more popular GrOb and other Siberian punk bands became, the less they believed they were making a difference. Letov and his fellow punks were swept away by the tides of history, unable to change the direction in which it flowed. Undoubtedly, music can be transformative on a personal level, but at least in the case of Siberian punk, it was unable to be transformative on a societal level.

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