

COMMUNISM'S FUTURES:  
INTELLIGENTSIA IMAGINATIONS IN THE  
WRITINGS OF THE STRUGATSKY BROTHERS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky were the most popular science fiction writing duo in Soviet Russia from the 1960s through the 1980s. Examining their imaginative fictional worlds against the background of wider changes in the Soviet Union allows scholars to gain insights in the world of the Soviet intelligentsia, the educated bearers of culture. As members of this group, the Strugatskys expressed the hopes, frustrations and fears, of their peers, vindicating their intellectual and emotional life. I support the argument that the Brothers occupied a middle ground between conformity and dissident, dubbed the “lost” intelligentsia by Lloyd Churchward. I demonstrate this state of being in Soviet society by providing context to popular Strugatsky works, and discussing the evolution of their perspective over time, as displayed in their literature. Featured prominently in Strugatsky works are themes of governmental authority and scientific development, therefore these are the key focuses of this research. The Strugatskys examination of the essential question of the meaning and attainment of happiness adds a new layer of insight to this argument. Studying the Strugatsky Brothers aligns with the greater trend in the field of cultural studies of the Soviet Union, as historians seek to gain greater understanding of how society experienced the communist government. The captivating writing of the Strugatskys, a mixture of foreboding, irony and humor, contributes to the narrative of Soviet history as the authors were culturally significant figures whose legacy remains influential today.

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## INTRODUCTION

The names Boris and Arkady Strugatsky are synonymous with science fiction in the Soviet Union, from the 1960s through the 1980s. Their voices stood for that of their repressed audience, which consisted mainly of the intelligentsia. The Strugatskys' characters were not superhuman beings, but relatable humans who made mistakes, drank heavily, cursed and were just as perplexed by their surroundings as the Strugatskys' readers. Science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin claimed that the Brothers' use of ordinary characters was uncommon for the genre during the 1960s and 1970s, and this lent to their popularity and success as mainstream Soviet celebrities who connected with their audience through writing.<sup>1</sup> Living in a country that repressed voices which spoke contrary to the government and the Communist Party, Boris and Arkady Strugatsky sought to speak out for themselves and their peers, for the betterment of their nation.

I argue that the literature of the Strugatskys gives insight into the world of the Soviet intelligentsia; in particular, their view of the political state of the Soviet Union and the efforts of the government to promote scientific development, from the 1960s through the 1980s. The Brothers' novels expressed the feelings of hope and fear of the Soviet intellectuals for what the future of the communist experiment held. As popular authors, the Strugatskys also wrote to find agreement with their intelligentsia audience, and to communicate mutual concerns for the Soviet future. I agree with existing scholarship on the Strugatskys, which identifies the growing pessimism in Strugatsky works as their career progressed. Building on this scholarship, I

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, "Foreword" in Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic*, trans. Olena Bormashenko. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2012). First published 1972. Kindle, Foreword.

examine this growing pessimism in terms of the Strugatskys portrayal of government and science in their works, while adding an examination of their conception of the pursuit of happiness in Soviet society.

This thesis is driven by research questions regarding the reoccurring themes of the Strugatskys' works over the course of their writing career. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the Soviet intelligentsia were uncertain of the future of the government, as each new leader was unpredictable. With the changes in the government during this period, how did the Strugatskys portrayal of government or figures of authority also change over time? How did the political environment of the Soviet Union influence the growing pessimism in their works? As intelligentsia and science fiction writers, the Brothers were also interested in the development of Soviet science. How did their view of the future of Soviet science change from the early optimism of the 1960s Space Race through the 1980s, when the Soviet Union struggled to keep pace with the United States? In addition to these questions, this thesis also adds to the conversation with the topic of the pursuit of happiness, as the Strugatskys' novels feature philosophical choices for their characters. How did the authors cause their audiences to consider what the audience needed to be happy? And finally, how do all three themes represent the growing pessimism through which the Strugatskys viewed the Soviet Union?

The main primary sources for this research are a selection of novels by the Strugatskys. The novels are all in the English translation. To cover three decades of their career, this thesis covers six novels, two for each phase of their writing career. The first period covers the 1960s, and includes the novels *Hard to Be a God*, translated by Olena Bormashenko and *Monday Starts*

on *Saturday*, translated by Andrew Bromfield.<sup>2</sup> The second period covers the late 1960s through the early 1970s, and includes *The Ugly Swans*, translated by Alice Stone Nakhimovsky and Alexander Nakhimovsky and *Roadside Picnic*, translated also by Olena Bormashenko.<sup>3</sup> The final period covers works that were published in the late 1970s through the 1980s, and these include *The Snail and the Slope*, translated by Alan Meyers, and *The Doomed City*, translated also by Andrew Bromfield.<sup>4</sup> For *Hard to Be a God*, *Monday Starts on Saturday*, *Roadside Picnic* and *The Doomed City*, this thesis references editions of the novels published in the 2000 to 2010s, which include Afterwords that were written by Boris Strugatsky specifically for the new editions. In these Afterwords, he reflected on his memory of the writing and publication process that he and Arkady underwent for that specific book. These newer reflections by Boris were also a valuable source for interpreting the various themes in the books, and what political and social events Boris felt had significant influence over the Brothers' writings.

The Soviet intelligentsia were a complex phenomenon. Consisting of educated individuals such as artists, writers and teachers, there was not a clearly defined role for these professionals in Soviet communism.<sup>5</sup> In ideal communism, everyone would have equal education and opportunity, but the government did not realistically expect this to happen, so Soviet leaders struggled to define appropriate roles for the group. Historically, Russian society saw the

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<sup>2</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, trans. Olena Bormashenko (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014). Kindle. First published: 1964. Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Monday Starts on Saturday*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Seagull Books, 2002). First published: 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *The Ugly Swans*, trans. Alice Stone Nakhimovsky and Alexander Nakhimovsky (England: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1979). First published 1972. Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979). Kindle. First published 1972.

<sup>4</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *The Snail on the Slope*, trans. Alan Meyers (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1980). Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016). Kindle. First published 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life Under Stalin and Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 11.



intelligentsia as advocates for the Russian nation, as they maintained the cultural standard for society. Therefore, the intelligentsia felt a sense of duty to the people of greater society.

Historians often discuss the dissident intelligentsia, but the intelligentsia were more diverse in opinion.<sup>6</sup> Many of the intelligentsia retained hopes in the potential Soviet system to reform and improve Russia. They struggled to extend space for criticism, but became lost because of forced repression and did not openly challenge the government. The works of the Strugatskys support labor historian and activist Lloyd Churchward's concept of a "lost" intelligentsia: the educated cultural leaders of society, "lost" because they maintained a moderate opinion of Soviet ideology.<sup>7</sup> Neither conservative supporters nor staunch dissidents, the Strugatskys initially hoped that the communist experiment could work; however, as time passed they began to lose hope and feared that only a totalitarian future lay ahead. Yet, they did not take this fear to the extreme of becoming dissident writers, but still sought to express their concerns within the restrictions of Soviet censorship. Therefore, this thesis also supports this view of the Strugatskys as part of the "lost" intelligentsia.

Arkady Strugatsky lived from August 1925 until October 1991, narrowly missing the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991. His brother Boris was born in April 1933 and died in November 2012 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Arkady and Boris grew up in Leningrad, known today as St. Petersburg, and still lived there when the city came under siege during World War II. The deadly siege lasted from September 1941 until January 1944, making it one of the longest sieges

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<sup>6</sup> Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia*, 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> On his ideas see: L. G. Churchward, *The Soviet Intelligentsia: An Essay on the Social Structure and Roles of Soviet Intellectuals During the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 1973). Roger D. Markwick, "Activist Academic: Lloyd Churchward as Labour Intellectual," *Labour History* no. 77 (Nov. 1999): 38. See also: Mark Sandle, "A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered," *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (London: Palgrave Macmillian Ltd., 2002), 138.

in history. A seventeen-year-old Arkady and his father tried to evacuate from the city in 1942. Arkady was successful, however his father did not survive the trip. Meanwhile the nine-year-old Boris remained in Leningrad with their mother.

The Soviet army drafted Arkady in 1943, the year after he escaped from Leningrad, when he turned eighteen. During his time in the army, Arkady learned Japanese at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. He used this education to work as a translator for the army, a job he held until the mid-1950s.<sup>8</sup> Aside from learning the Japanese language, he was a student of medieval Japanese literature.<sup>9</sup> Boris survived the siege of Leningrad and attended Leningrad University, where he studied in the Department of Mathematics and Mechanics for an astronomy degree. After he graduated in the mid-1950s, Boris worked at the Pulkovo Observatory, where he continued an informal education in computer technology.<sup>10</sup> Boris was known to be more analytical than his brother, who in contrast was more creative and outgoing.<sup>11</sup> In the beginning of the 1960s, both brothers turned to writing fiction full time, combining their interests in literature and science. They eventually reached the status of the preeminent Soviet science fiction authors as they are known today. Arkady maintained a belief that science fiction expressed the opinions of the people in a way that other art forms could not, and so the Brothers used their popularity

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<sup>8</sup> Boris Strugatsky, "Afterword," in Boris and Arkady Strugatsky *Roadside Picnic*, trans. Olena Bormashenko. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2012), Kindle, Afterword.

<sup>9</sup> Viacheslav Ivanov, "The Lessons of the Strugatskys," *Russian Studies in Literature* 47, no. 4 (2011): 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ivanov, "The Lessons," 9.

<sup>11</sup> Evgenii Tsymbal, "Tarkovsky and the Strugatskii Brothers: The Prehistory of *Stalker*," *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 8 no. 2 (2015): 256.

and talent to reach out to an audience that had similar views on the Soviet experiment and wanted to see their nation prosper to provide a better life for all.<sup>12</sup>

Science fiction as a literary genre is a source to study history from the perspective of the authors and their intended audience. In Soviet Russia, science fiction was a mainstream cultural phenomenon, and many writers of science fiction had experience in a scientific field. In Russia, society expected literature to serve a purpose for the reader, to teach a lesson or express ‘appropriate’ ways of life. In the words of dissident writer Vladimir Voinovich: “People care about literature in Russia because it tried to solve some important problems. In Russia, literature was always the teacher.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, literature played a prominent role in Russian life. Science fiction witnessed a wave of popularity during the 1920s and 1930s, producing classics such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, a dystopia that is hailed among science fiction internationally for its social criticism of totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup> *We* is widely considered to have influenced other classic works of fiction, such as George Orwell’s *1984*.<sup>15</sup> Scholars separate this early wave of science fiction from later Soviet science fiction due to Stalin’s increased enforcement of ideological conformity from the late 1920s until his death on March 5, 1953. During this time, Stalin allowed very few publications of science fiction nor any experimental literature. With the rise of Nikita Khrushchev to power after Stalin’s death, science fiction saw a rebirth. Scientist-

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<sup>12</sup> Strugatsky, Arkadii, Vladimir Gopman, Mark Knighton, and Darko Suvin, “Science Fiction Teaches the Civic Virtues: An Interview with Arkadii Strugatsky,” ed. Darko Suvin and trans. Mark Knighton, *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no.1 (1991): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4240028>.

<sup>13</sup> Marcia DeSanctis, “Dispatches from Russia: An Interview with Vladimir Voinovich,” *Tin House*, January 24, 2013, <http://tinhouse.com/22200-2/>.

<sup>14</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1924).

<sup>15</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (England: Harcourt Inc., 1949).

turned-writer Ivan Yefremov ignited this new wave with his work *Andromeda: A Space-Age Tale*, published in 1959.<sup>16</sup>

Yefremov's epic was ideologically conformist, depicting a peaceful utopian world with futuristic technology, from which a spaceship leaves in search of a far-off planet. Along the journey, the scientists learn valuable lessons in greed and ambition as the expedition makes contacts with aliens. In the end, the space crew realizes that Earth is the most beautiful planet of all and the humans should not want to leave their perfect utopia. Yefremov's success with *Andromeda* encouraged other writers, many of them also scientists, to depict their aspirations for the Soviet future. The Strugatskys took to writing full time in the early 1960s, after the release of *Andromeda*, and so began their long and turbulent career.

### Historiography

Academic scholarship discusses the Strugatsky Brothers place in the literary history of the USSR from a variety of angles. Many scholarly articles on the Strugatskys commonly appear in the literary journals on Russian or Slavic writing, or science fiction journals such as the predominant *Science Fiction Studies*. Since the 1970s, several books and academic articles have covered Soviet science fiction; however, it has not been a heavily examined subject in English language or Western scholarship. In the past two decades, historians of the Soviet Union have experienced the cultural turn, and this approach remains popular today. The cultural turn began in the 1970s, yet the historiography of the Soviet Union underwent an archival revolution after 1991 when the communist regime ended. With the gradual opening of archives since this event,

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<sup>16</sup> Ivan Yefremov, *Andromeda: A Space-Age Tale* (Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 1959, 2004).

history was re-examined in the light of newly available evidence. An important trend in Soviet and Cold War history is examining social history from below, looking for how people experienced history. Science fiction studies have also been following this cultural trend, using literature to gain insight into the emotional life of the Soviet citizens, including the educated Soviet readers.

The foundational book on science fiction theory, referred to in most studies since its release in 1978, is Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*.<sup>17</sup> Suvin's study was instrumental for the transition from relying on primarily literary theories for dissecting science fiction, to studying the genre from a more historical perspective. Suvin brought history into the picture by dividing his study into two parts: first, he outlined his literary theory of cognitive estrangement, and second, he wrote a timeline of the genre from its origins in Greek mythology to the 1970s. Cognitive estrangement is a concept and device for taking the reader out of the world he is familiar with while simultaneously adding familiar elements as a way of social commentary. Thus, a reader would recognize similarities with their reality in a fictional world that draws attention to these elements in a way a person would not notice in everyday life. This allows authors to highlight social or political issues by embedding the issues in an alternate reality to show the reader a new perspective. As for Suvin's history of the genre, he demonstrated widespread examples of the development of science fiction. Beginning with Greek myths that embody supernatural elements, Suvin's extensive timeline traced key authors such as H. G. Wells and the Strugatskys to give examples of the variations in the genre. He also discussed science fiction by region to draw attention to areas

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<sup>17</sup> Darko Suvin, *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

such as Soviet Russia that were less well known in the West. During his career, Suvin also argued for the relevance of the genre for social science research, and he contributed to the start of the journal *Science Fiction Studies* to encourage study of the subject from multiple angles.

In the two decades following the 1970s, additional significant works were published, many of which are relevant to this study. Two years after Suvin's publication, social historian John Griffith published *Three Tomorrows: American, British and Soviet Science Fiction*.<sup>18</sup> Griffith highlighted the similarities and differences of how the three nations' citizens experienced the turbulent Cold War, as expressed in science fiction. Griffith identified key topics through which to study the genre as a lens to Cold War society. These topics included utopias, nuclear war, heroism and optimism. The literature of the USSR emerged as unique due to the influence of its ideology, with a greater focus on the collective, man as the highest form of intelligence, and the communist future on the horizon.<sup>19</sup>

The opening of archives after the fall of the USSR amplified the research of science fiction, first through literary studies, then through social and cultural historical perspectives. In the 1990s, scholars mainly discussed ways in which writers circumvented censorship and worked within the party lines yet challenged party ideology. While dissident writing is often popular in Western scholarship, as the rebel writer appears more exciting, the Strugatskys do not receive as much coverage as they never openly rebelled against the Soviet system.<sup>20</sup> Edith Clowes,

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<sup>18</sup> John Griffiths, *Three Tomorrows: American, British and Soviet Science Fiction* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> Griffiths, *Three Tomorrows*, 109, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Examples of Soviet dissident literature include: Andrei Sakharov, *Andrei Sakharov and Peace*, ed. Edward D. Lozansky (New York: Avon, 1985); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979). First published 1973; Vladimir Voinovich, *Moscow 2042*, trans. Richard Lourie (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1987).

professor of Slavic Languages and Literature, published in 1993 *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia*, in which she compared post-Stalin utopian and dystopian literature.<sup>21</sup> Clowes developed a concept of meta-utopian language as a means by which authors used Soviet-appropriate images of utopia to mask underlying challenging ideas. Following this idea, in 1995, Elena Gomel of Tel Aviv University published "The Poetics of Censorship: Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky."<sup>22</sup> Gomel portrayed the Brothers' use of allegory within allegory to maintain meaning in their works when faced with censorship. For Gomel, allegory was a significant option for writers, allowing them to use creative language to speak to their readers on Soviet reality. Clowes and Gomel highlight the determination of authors who continued expressing opinions unfavorable to the government. These literary interpretations of science fiction and increased attention to the Strugatskys paved the way to the most recent renewed attention to the Brothers' writing.

One work cited often in conjunction with Darko Suvin's, is Fredric Jameson's 2005 *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*.<sup>23</sup> A philosopher and literary critic, Jameson examined the concept of utopia, which is decidedly political, and argued that the more a utopia tries to be separate from reality, the more unattainable it becomes. From Jameson's book onward, scholars rely on both literary theory and historical methods to discuss the role that literature occupies in representing the time in which it was written. These sources highlight political attitudes, social conditions and the individual

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<sup>21</sup> Edith W. Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Elena Gomel, "The Poetics of Censorship: Allegory as Form and Ideology in the Novels of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky," *Science Fiction Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 1995): 87-105.

<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).

experience of the author. Due to the predominance of the Strugatskys in science fiction literature in the USSR, the journal *Russian Studies in Literature* dedicated an entire issue to them in 2011, and these articles serve as a foundation to this thesis.<sup>24</sup> The articles cover a variety of topics, including political context, the influence of censorship and detailed comparisons of specific works. The general conclusion which emerges from these articles is the increasing pessimism in the Strugatsky works. What is lacking is a detailed look at the Brothers as members of the intelligentsia, as products of Soviet ideology and as commentators on the emerging social and political context in which they lived.

To explain Russian science fiction in the 1920s and the 1930s in her 2012 book *We Modern People*, Anindita Banerjee refers to Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural pedagogy."<sup>25</sup> It follows that aspects of culture, such as literature, utilize the hopes and fears of the readers in a way that allows them to view their reality in a new light. This aligns with Darko Suvin's foundational theory of cognitive estrangement, and underscores why science fiction is unique in functioning as a lens to history. Banerjee's use of Gramsci's theory and her examination of science fiction as a means of studying modernity in Russia, also serves as a foundation for this thesis.

Progressing chronologically through six of Arkady and Boris' major novels, this thesis is organized into three chapters which coincide with three epochs of Soviet history: Khrushchev's Thaw (the early 1960s), the early Brezhnev years (late 1960s-early 1970s) and the late Brezhnev years through Gorbachev (late 1970s-1980s). Each chapter covers two Strugatsky works,

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<sup>24</sup> *Russian Studies in Literature*, 47, no. 4 (2011).

<sup>25</sup> Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 11.



including publication history and the struggle against censorship. The Strugatskys increasing pessimism was a gradual process, with no clear line or turning point. Thus, the books are discussed in order of publication, which does not always coincide with time of writing. For a time, the Strugatskys were unclear on where the future was headed, and explored both positive and negative possibilities before turning more negative. This thesis also uses cinematic interpretations of the novels when applicable, as they portray how intelligentsia directors interpreted Strugatsky themes. Significant to understanding the Strugatsky novels is the environment in which they wrote, as the direction of the Soviet state changed throughout the Strugatskys' lives. Developing from the time of Stalin, the role of the intelligentsia changed with the political leadership, becoming at times more liberal, then more conservative, creating confusion. Thus, viewing the Strugatskys as intelligentsia adds another layer to their multifaceted literature, and contributes to the growing conversation on the social and cultural history of the Soviet Union.

## CHAPTER 1: KHRUSHCHEV AND THE 1960s

“They will never let us say what we believe is right, because what they believe is right is something completely different. And if for us communism is a world of freedom and creativity, for them communism is a society where the people immediately and with pleasure perform all the prescriptions of the party and government.”<sup>26</sup> – Boris Strugatsky

During the 1960s, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky hoped for a communist government as described above, that allowed people the freedom of expression that the Soviet system repressed. As time progressed, this hope faltered and disappeared by the end of the Soviet period. When the Strugatskys started writing at the end of the 1950s, the Soviet Union entered a liberal period in which the intelligentsia had power to express their opinions on society and the state. The Strugatskys took advantage of this opportunity to offer their thoughts on the years ahead. After the death of Joseph Stalin on March 5, 1953, a period of oligarchy followed where leaders vied for power. Nikita Khrushchev emerged as head of the Soviet government before the year was over, bringing with him new ideas for the direction of the nation, thus ushering in the liberalization. Referred to as the “Thaw”, Khrushchev’s time in power begun a relaxation of Stalinist repressive policies. In February of 1956 at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Khrushchev made his famous “Secret Speech” and denounced Stalin’s harsh policies to other members of government. Khrushchev’s surprising remarks ushered in a new direction, particularly regarding literature, that fostered the optimism of early Strugatsky novels.

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<sup>26</sup> Boris Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, trans. Olena Bormashenko (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), Afterword, Kindle.

After the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, instructions given to officials and editors indicated that writers could not be imprisoned for a piece that was approved by a censor, as they previously could be under Stalin. Writers during the Thaw looked for inventive ways to circumvent extensive editing and gain the censor's stamp of approval. They would 'accidentally' make mistakes, mistype, use metaphors like Aesopian fables or set the story in another historical period.<sup>27</sup> During the early 1960s, censorship was liberal as compared to under Stalin, so writers could be more obvious in their critiques of society to an extent, if the censor approved the writing. The Strugatskys used this to their advantage to speak through science fiction about the state of Russian politics, society and scientific development.

Two of the Strugatskys' popular novels published during the Thaw were *Hard to Be a God* (1964) and *Monday Starts on Saturday* (1964), and these novels demonstrate the authors' initial willingness to work within the Soviet system. These drastically different works comment on the political situation of the Khrushchev period and on scientific and technological development, which was vital for the entrance of the Soviet Union into the modern age. To analyze the messages of Boris and Arkady in these early examples, it is logical to look at each book separately, first *Hard to Be a God*, followed by *Monday Starts on Saturday*, due to the drastic differences in the plotlines of the novels. The final section of the chapter looks at the works in conjunction to highlight the unifying theme of the search for happiness that appears in both works.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Soviet Censorship*, ed. Martin Dewhurst and Martin Farrell (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1973), 8-15.

### The Role of the Intelligentsia in the 1960s

Under Stalin, there was much confusion regarding the role of the educated group of society that was the intelligentsia. They resembled an elite status, more educated than the masses and not out farming the field or laboring in the factory like the depictions of proper contributing communists. Instead, they were in universities reading literature and researching. This group did not have a clear place in Stalin's interpretation of Marxism, a philosophy which relied on the average worker as the backbone of society, and thus the intelligentsia were paradoxical to the Soviet government's aims. Stalin tried to balance his ideology towards these academics by referring to them as "toiling intelligentsia," assigning them jobs out in the country, and instilling discipline in the students through fear.<sup>28</sup> This was the social and political mindset that the Strugatsky Brothers encountered, as in 1950, Arkady recently graduated from the military institute foreign language program and Boris graduated high school and prepared to attend Leningrad University to study astronomy.<sup>29</sup>

After Stalin's death, the air of confusion regarding the role of the intelligentsia continued. The contradictory mixture of the elevated status that educated citizens attained and Stalin's Marxist ideology did not have a compromise ahead. The 1960s also featured competition between humanism and science, as both the arts and sciences experimented with newfound freedoms. Khrushchev encouraged the study of science and the creativity of students, while also degrading the role of culture and the arts in society, which created another paradox for the intelligentsia to comprehend. He was careful not to praise students over other members of

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<sup>28</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 81. The Strugatskys use Stalin's term "toiling intelligentsia" in an argument among the characters on the necessity of the intelligentsia.

<sup>29</sup> Ivanov, "The Lessons," 9.

society; for instance, when thanking the citizens for contributing to the launch of the first satellite *Sputnik*, he emphasized that street cleaners should receive the same share of success, their only qualification being that they were Soviet citizens.<sup>30</sup>

This sense of patriotism could be beneficial for a nation building their reputation, and aligned with the leader's own humble background. Khrushchev was of non-intelligentsia roots, born into a poor working-class family, and he became known for his unpolished behavior.<sup>31</sup> He championed those who knew the strain of physical labor, and put programs in place to funnel young people into labor positions. He established a quota system to promote the college admission of those with labor experience over educational qualifications, and required students to take on jobs in the country upon graduating.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, Khrushchev looked to the educated for opinions on policy. These were students who studied politics and could also work as consultants or publish policy research in scholarly journals during the 1960s.<sup>33</sup> Khrushchev was vital to the growth of science during this time, as he believed that science would help the Soviet Union win the Cold War. Under his leadership, the Scientific-Technological Revolution began in 1956, which aimed to create social progress with the aid of science and technological development.<sup>34</sup> It was in this period that the Strugatskys and the intelligentsia embraced science and science fiction, and imagined the benefits that technology could bring to the communist future.

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<sup>30</sup> Ivanov, "The Lessons," 159.

<sup>31</sup> Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 240.

<sup>32</sup> Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia*, 160.

<sup>33</sup> Sandle, "A Triumph," 137.

<sup>34</sup> Susan E. Reid, "The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): 290, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/stable/30036325>.

In 1962, Khrushchev attended a contemporary art exhibit in Moscow at which he was appalled by the experimental art that he saw, and ran through the halls cursing. As Boris Strugatsky later writes in the Afterword for the 2014 edition of *Hard to Be a God*, this gave rise to a story that Khrushchev, glancing in a mirror at the exhibit (yelling “‘And what’s this butt with ears?’”) would look negatively on creative expression.<sup>35</sup> This image of Khrushchev bred fear among intellectuals that there would be a return to strict socialist realism: traditional arts showing an ideal Soviet reality. Nevertheless, the “‘exchange of opinions on literature and art’” as Boris referred to it, continued into 1963.<sup>36</sup> On March 26, 1963, the Moscow Writer’s Union held a meeting on science fiction with popular authors, editors and other figures involved in the publishing industry. It resulted in a heated exchange of opinions, including those of Boris, who was in attendance, as the men discussed the future of the genre and critiqued each other’s works. The writers were surprised when no one was arrested for the opinions told at the meeting, and when they could publish articles on how their thoughts on literature differed from those of the party.<sup>37</sup> The intelligentsia emerged with a limited sense of freedom, restricted by the skepticism of the unpredictable leadership of Khrushchev.

Thrown in with the conflicting love-hate relationship was Khrushchev’s optimistic promises; for instance, his claim that there would be communism achieved by 1980, just twenty years ahead. He saw success in improving living standards and the swelling of the intelligentsia, whose ranks expanded to 2,396,100 people, three times the pre-WWII levels, as from 1959 to

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<sup>35</sup> Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in *Hard to Be a God*, Afterword.

<sup>36</sup> Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in *Hard to Be a God*, Afterword.

<sup>37</sup> Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in *Hard to Be a God*, Afterword.

1967 the intelligentsia grew by 70%.<sup>38</sup> However, numerous difficulties in areas such as economics and foreign policy created a growing sense of disillusionment in this educated society.<sup>39</sup> Still unsure of their place, the intelligentsia agreed with many of Khrushchev's initiatives especially in expanding free speech, while remaining wary of the man himself. The Strugatskys demonstrate this borderline position clearly in their first successful novel, *Hard to Be a God*, published in 1964, the final year of Khrushchev's Thaw.

### *Hard to Be a God: The Strugatskys on Government*

*Hard to Be a God* is rife with warning about what that past may indicate for the future of the Soviet Union. The novel is a product of the uncertain times during which the Strugatskys were on the brink of popularity that was to develop from this book. Arguably a work of fantasy or science fiction, it features an unhappy protagonist: a historian who is observing a foreign planet falling into a chaos. The character witnesses danger that realistically recalls the past Soviet reality for an intelligentsia audience. Within the pages of this novel, a fascist dictator performs a *coup d'état* disrupting the natural course of history. To consolidate his power, the dictator orders bloody killings of the educated or of any person who resists his Gray Army. Due to the liberalization of the Thaw, the Strugatskys in this novel could openly address the fears of their people while they illuminated their hopes for the future.

The setting of *Hard to Be a God* is the Earth-like planet of Arkanar. In terms of technological development, it is far behind Earth because the planet remains set in the feudal

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<sup>38</sup> Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia*, 3. See also: Sandle, "A Triumph," 137.

<sup>39</sup> Specific examples of failed campaigns include the Virgin Lands Campaign, an agricultural initiative to prevent food shortages, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, all perceived as failures on Khrushchev's behalf and instances of his inexperience in areas of governing and foreign relations.

Middle Ages. The story follows Russian communist and historian Anton, known as Don Rumata on Arkanar, sent to the planet with other historians to study it. Early in the novel Anton expresses his dislike of the planet, saying that “Here everything is pointless. Knowledge isn’t enough and gold is worthless, because it comes too late.”<sup>40</sup> Anton and the other Earthlings expect history to follow its course, naturally developing towards communism and they are forbidden to interfere with the civilization’s progress. However, the novel’s opening is ominous as Anton feels that Arkanar is not heading in that direction, but rather he sees a fascist nature in the way the bourgeoisie rules.<sup>41</sup>

The main conflict ensues when Don Reba, who is the Prime Minister of Arkanar, and his Gray Army, wage war against the intellectual class as part of a *coup d’état* over the monarchy. The Gray Army is in turn defeated by the Holy Order of militaristic monks, whom Don Reba had secret loyalty with in exchange for a position as both head religious leader and governor of Arkanar. Meanwhile, an organized crime group encouraged by the Holy Order pillages the city and chaos is rampant. Anton strikes a deal with Reba to spare his life and Reba sets about installing his rule. Anton returns to take his girlfriend to Earth, but Reba’s men ambush them. In his rage, Anton, who refrained from any killing due to both the policy of noninterference and his own moral compass, slaughters many of the soldiers and then Don Reba himself. This causes the Earth observers to take action and bring Anton home.<sup>42</sup>

A historian can see the likenesses between what was happening in the Strugatskys’ lives and what messages or opinions they were expressing to their intelligentsia readership. There are

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<sup>40</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 229.



a few key elements of the plot that stand out as particularly relevant to focus on, although the novel has many layers. The character of Don Reba as the antagonist and his close assimilation with Stalin's head of the secret police, Beria, the hunting of intellectuals, and the unpredictable course of history, shed light on how the writers perceived the state of the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, and where they expected the future would lead.

#### Offering Warning Through the Character of Don Reba

The plot of *Hard to Be a God* is quite grim: a man who witnesses the collapse of a government and in the process, compromises his moral values. Compared to novels written later in the Strugatskys' career however, this one has a different tone, as it reads more like an alternative future that is still preventable, rather than a hopeless end. The Strugatskys are presenting society with a warning: multiple paths lay ahead of us, and we must learn from the past to head down the correct one. The character of Don Reba is one example of how the authors brought historical events into their works with their own interpretations. The inspiration for the character of Reba was Lavrentiy Beria, a close associate of Stalin who was head of the secret police and then became Deputy Prime Minister after Stalin's death.<sup>43</sup> A predominate fear in *Hard to Be a God* is the possible return of a figure such as Beria: a leader seeking to establish a harsh and bloody rule. The authors used the figure of Don Reba to show the threat that such a person would be to the communist future by embedding elements of Beria's history into the fictional Arkanar.

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<sup>43</sup> Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, 155. Stalin named the Soviet secret police the NKVD, but this name changed in 1954 to the well-known title, the KGB.

In 1938, Beria took his post as the head of the NKVD, the branch of the Soviet government that carried out Stalin's Great Terror, a series of purges throughout the Party and society. Mass imprisonments and executions characterized Stalin's rule, which brought down pressure on many aspects of Soviet life as people disappeared from their jobs. This created fear among society that one day it might also happen to you.<sup>44</sup> As head of the secret police, Beria played a key role during the purges. He had the power to label people as enemies of the state, which caused their arrest and even execution. After the death of Stalin, Beria was part of an alliance of leaders vying for power including Prime Minister Malenkov, who appeared most likely to succeed Stalin. Beria became Deputy Prime Minister in March 1953, yet he would fail to cement his position in the new Soviet government. At the suggestion of Khrushchev, the Party removed Beria from office and had him executed in December 1953.<sup>45</sup> Boris Strugatsky later wrote that in original drafts of the novel, he spelled Reba's name "Rebia", as an anagram for Beria. At Ivan Yefremov's suggestion, the Strugatskys made the name a little less obvious for publication, but the actions of Reba would still remind those older intelligentsia of the years of Stalin's purges, regardless of the spelling.<sup>46</sup>

Don Reba at the start of the novel is the Prime Minister of Arkanar, the same position that Beria occupied after the death of Stalin. Reba launches an attack on intellectuals, identified as anyone who can read, as he sees them as a threat to his impending takeover. This attack on intellectuals speaks to the concerns of the Strugatskys and others of their status that resulted from inconsistent treatment by the Soviet government as discussed above. Historians refer to Stalin's

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<sup>44</sup> Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, 108-109.

<sup>45</sup> Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Hard to Be a God*, Afterword. Ivan Yefremov, author of *Andromeda: A Space Age Tale* who paved the way for Strugatskys' science fiction, was a vocal supporter of the writers.

policy towards this social group in the 1940s and 1950s as *Zhdanovshchina*, or the “time of Zhdanov”, a leading figure under Stalin, although Stalin himself had heavy influence over this policy. The policy sought to control culture production in the Soviet Union, and to guard culture from outside influence, which sometimes resulted in censorship or harsh action. Even after Zhdanov’s death, the policy continued with increased violence and anti-Semitism, the government questioning the loyalty of the people to ensure that proper party ideologies permeated society.<sup>47</sup>

*Hard to Be a God* brings this fear to the foreground in Chapter 1, when Anton meets a man who is trying to flee Arkanar because he is educated, the man hiding his books underneath his shirt. Anton, who should turn him in according to law, hesitates and even hides the man when they come across the Grays hunting “literates” on the path.<sup>48</sup> Anton spares him. According to Don Reba, anyone who can read, write, or do math equations is dangerous:

Literacy, literacy is the source of it all, my brothers! First they tell us  
money can’t buy happiness, then they say peasants are people too,  
and it only gets worse--offensive verses, then rioting.<sup>49</sup>

However, the novel’s hero knows better, because he is a member of the intelligentsia back on Earth, and the audience reading this novel would empathize with the struggle and pity. Reba gives the intellectuals he captures a punishment fitting to a feudal state, rather than sending prisoners to labor camps as in Stalin’s time. He imprisons them in the Tower of Merriment to torture confessions of guilt and betrayal. The tower, according to historian Muireann Maguire, is

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<sup>47</sup> Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia*, 81-83, 87.

<sup>48</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 25.

reminiscent of a prison in Moscow, Lubyanka, a main building of the Soviet secret police after the Bolshevik Revolution, which the police used for interrogations with similar intent.<sup>50</sup>

Don Reba's power grab equates to that of Hitler, literary scholar Elena Gomel suggested, as the Strugatskys compare Stalin/Beria to Hitler through Reba's character.<sup>51</sup> Don Reba and his soldiers continue to remind readers about Stalin's actions while also affirming the close affiliation between Stalin's rule and that of Hitler's. Midway through the plot, Reba orders the Grays to go out on a bloody purge of Reba's enemies and Anton refers to this as the "Night of the Long Knives." This is a reference to the historical event of the same name, where Hitler ordered a purge of the Nazi Party to consolidate his power in 1934. Gomel writes that this concept is vital to *Hard to Be a God* because the intelligentsia already saw this connection in their minds, and so reading it in a published book gave their concerns validity.<sup>52</sup> Anton recognizes Reba's plan very early in the novel, telling others that Reba has fascist intentions, but the historians ignore him. Anton's lack of a voice would also find empathy among the intelligentsia, as they vigilantly restricted what they said in public about Stalin while he was still in power, and remained wary after his death as well. Supported by the militant monks and the organized crime bosses, Reba's war against his political opponents and securing of power begins, embodying a Stalin-Hitler type antagonist, whom the protagonist Russian communists have victory over in the end.

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<sup>50</sup> Muireann Maguire, "Back to the Future in Arkanar: The Strugatskiis, Aleksei German Sr, and the Problem of Injustice in *Hard to Be a God*," *Studies in Russian And Soviet Cinema* 6, no. 2 (2015), 237. In the 2014 Kindle English translation, the Tower of Merriment is referred to as the Merry Tower. The Soviet secret police, in the time when the Strugatskys were writing *Hard to Be a God*, were known by the well-known name of the KGB.

<sup>51</sup> Gomel, "The Poetics of Censorship," 87-105.

<sup>52</sup> Gomel, "The Poetics of Censorship," 94.

### *Hard to Be a God* Revisited: Aleksei German's Film

*Hard to Be a God* has remained one of the most popular of the Strugatsky works in Russia. In worldwide publication, it remains typically the second most popular work, with *Roadside Picnic* in the lead.<sup>53</sup> Due to its endurance, Russian filmmaker Aleksei German released an epic cinematic version of the novel in 2013. Although not well known in the West, German's films are popular in Russia for their interpretation of the time of Stalin and the experience of Russian society.<sup>54</sup> German spent over twelve years filming the movie and perhaps decades to plan, having passed away when it was still in post-production, leaving his wife and son to prepare it for release.<sup>55</sup> Compared to the novel, the film takes a much darker and even dirtier tone while it preserves the modern day intelligentsia memory of Stalinism and the persistent issues of Soviet society today.

Aleksei German was part of the "lost" intelligentsia who were in limbo between the Communists and the dissidents, proclaiming in his own words, "'I was never a communist, and I was never an anti-communist – I was occupied with something entirely different.'"<sup>56</sup> German was of the same generation as the Strugatskys, born in 1938, and so he lived through the same events. German's dedication to *Hard to Be a God*, after establishing himself as a popular filmmaker, speaks to effect of the novel and the affiliation of the intelligentsia for it. Alexander Graham, who studied German's films, argued that they are reconstructions of memory: German's own

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<sup>53</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Hard to Be a God*, Afterword.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Graham, "'Immersion in Time': History, Memory and the Question of Readability in the Films of Aleksei German," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 6, no. 2 (2012): 178.

<sup>55</sup> Glenn Kenny, "Hard to Be a God," *RogerEbert.com*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hard-to-be-a-god-2015>.

<sup>56</sup> Graham, "Immersion in Time," 178.

recollection of the Soviet experience.<sup>57</sup> His interpretation aligns with the Strugatskys' view of repression and warning for vigilance in government. Yet, German's film differs in that it is pessimistic for the future of Russia, whereas the Strugatskys still retained hope that mistakes could be fixed or avoided.

The most jarring element in German's movie is the filth that is Arkanar, and the visible depiction of everyday life. The film shows the audience the people who are in the background: the citizens of Arkanar and the Soviet society they represent. German had a habit of this in his films, giving side characters brief moments of screen time in which they share their experience.<sup>58</sup> The people of Arkanar must slosh through muddy streets. Dirt even covers Anton, a noble, who must always pick flies out of his drink. German's interpretation of what Russian society has become is thus a place of degradation. In the cinematic Arkanar, we see the Grays drown a man because he can read, and a young boy told by his mother to lie about his lip deformity being the result of an injury, not a birth defect.<sup>59</sup> Filmed in black and white, these depressing scenes exaggerate the dull, backwards and grimy world that Aleksei German warns modern day Russia is becoming. The characters often break the fourth wall, meaning they look directly at the camera and speak to it, appearing as if the audience watching is an involved character as well. Ending on a pessimistic note, Anton chooses to stay on the planet instead of returning, or rather escaping, to Earth, thus embracing his loss of morality. Anton, and likely German, perceives that society is struggling to overcome its past, and the threat of dictatorship remains all too real. *Hard to Be a God* on film keeps the Strugatskys' fears alive for a new generation of Russians, while also

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<sup>57</sup> Graham, "Immersion in Time," 179.

<sup>58</sup> Graham, "Immersion in Time," 184.

<sup>59</sup> Aleksei German, dir. *Hard to Be a God* (2013; St. Petersburg: Lenfilm, 2013. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2016), Digital streaming from UCF Library Online Collection.

keeping intact some of the original themes that the authors developed to give their audience something to think about, including the role of history in communism.

### Utopia and Morality: Why it is *Hard to Be a God*

In looking down on the town from above, Anton reflects that the townsfolk are hardly people at all and that “only the bloody centuries of history” would form them into modern, free people.<sup>60</sup> The progression of history is a theme that the Strugatskys brought into question with *Hard to Be a God*. During an interview in 1988, Arkady spoke on the role of science fiction as having the potential to draw social and philosophical conclusions or questions to the attention of their audience, and one could argue that they sought to do this in their own works.<sup>61</sup> In this novel, Arkady and Boris focused on the theory of communism and the ‘natural’ timeline of history, boldly questioning the very ideology that was the core of the Soviet Union.

According to Karl Marx, whose theories were the foundations for Soviet communism, history moves in stages. To summarize his mid-19<sup>th</sup> century theories, from the early days of civilization arose feudalism, a state like that of Arkanar, but from this evolved industrialization and capitalism. Feudal states tied workers to the means of production: they lived on the farm, but someone else owned the land. Urbanization and better technology developed into industrialization and a capitalist system where workers were subject to the superstructure of individuals who owned the factories, the materials, and had the money to hire the workers.<sup>62</sup> Marx argued for the attainment of workers’ rights in the next step of history, communism. In this future, class statues ceased to exist and there was equality of the means of production. Capitalism

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<sup>60</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 145.

<sup>61</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, “Science Fiction Teaches,” 2.

<sup>62</sup> “Marxism-Leninism,” *New World Encyclopedia*, 2014, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Marxism-Leninism>.

left the workers wanting better wages and working conditions, leading to struggle among the classes. Lenin used this ideology to lead the workers in the Bolshevik Revolution, and Stalin continued the rhetoric, editing it to some degree. The leaders of the Soviet Union, especially Khrushchev, claimed to be working towards this ideal utopian future, however founding it on a base of violence and repression.

In his Secret Speech of February 1956, Khrushchev condemned Stalin's violent interpretation of communism as a disruption in the progress towards utopia. Khrushchev's speech opened the path for the Strugatskys to question the necessity of Stalin's actions, which the intelligentsia also privately questioned.<sup>63</sup> Anton embodies this doubt as he is skeptical of the government from the onset. The authors used *Hard to Be a God* to discuss that Stalin's method of leadership did not align with Marxist principles, by equating Stalin with the fascist leader Don Reba. Don Reba disrupts the development of Arkanar by impeding its path to capitalism, and eventually socialism, and instilling a dictatorship instead. His rule unites the religious order of the monks as well as the local crime bosses, but not the workers nor the educated. By leaving the workers out of the alliance, the Strugatskys still upheld the principles of Soviet realism, painting religion and crime as enemies. Yet they questioned Marxist ideology by singling out Stalin as a break in the progression. Was there a direct historical path and Stalin an anomaly, or is the future more unpredictable than theorized?

Anton himself succumbs to darkness, going through a change of character. After refusing to kill during years on the planet, he takes the lives of many in the end after Reba's men murder his girlfriend. Anton's pity for the people throughout the novel is weakness in the eyes of the

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<sup>63</sup> Erik Simon, "The Strugatskys in Political Context," *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 3 (2004): 385.



other historians abiding by the rule of nonintervention. Yet it is this pity that creates empathy for the intelligentsia audience. Violence comes into question: is it morally right for Anton to meet Reba's purge with more violence? Anton compromises his values in the end, perhaps hinting to an earlier draft of the novel in which Arkady wanted to depict how even good communists can turn bad.<sup>64</sup> The Strugatskys cause the audience to think when, in the very last scene of the book, Anton, with strawberry juice on his hand, reaches out to a friend. The friend recoils, mistaking the juice for blood. Even back on Earth, years later, Anton cannot undo his actions.

This inability to go back or change the past, is another main theme in *Hard to Be a God*. In the Prologue, Anton as a young boy is playing in the woods with his friends when they come across train tracks, and a "Do Not Enter" sign. Anton's friends warn him not to go that way but he continues, finding a destroyed bridge and in front of it a skeleton from a past war, likely World War II, holding a machine gun sunken into the ground. Anton returns to tell his friends that he found the "skeleton of a fascist."<sup>65</sup> Rife with meaning, this image warns the reader that the past is gone, and looking backwards yields only destruction. On a positive note, this also indicates that fascism, such as the ruthless leadership of Stalin, was behind the Soviet people now that new leadership had come to power. However, the remainder of the novel shows how a world could slip into that path again, thus society should be aware that in the midst of the optimism of Khrushchev, they should remain vigilant, not forgetting of the past but focused on making a better future. Thus, the Strugatskys were still hopeful that what is past is gone and that the communist future ahead is still bright.

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<sup>64</sup> Maguire, "Back to the Future", 238.

<sup>65</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 15.

### *Monday Starts on Saturday: The Strugatskys on Science*

Published in the same year as *Hard to Be a God*, *Monday Starts on Saturday* is a unique Strugatsky work that approaches 1960s Russia with humor. Set in a magical institute, as opposed to the dark and gritty Arkanar, this work contains magic in the literal sense. The main character begins as an outsider but quickly witnesses the chaos that is the scientific study of unpredictable and vague magic. However, the novel is a larger statement, or perhaps an inside joke, on the workings of Soviet institutions. Written from Boris' personal experience in the field of astronomy, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky fictionalized the development of science during the Scientific-Technological Revolution, and highlighted the never-ending work week for Soviet research: the reason that Monday begins on Saturday.<sup>66</sup>

In the 2002 English translation of *Monday*, Boris Strugatsky wrote that *Monday* was a collective work, first conceptualized in the late 1950s, after the Brothers had experience working for the government. Friends contributed various ideas to the early stages of the work, largely through making jokes. One joke imagined a fictional new Ernest Hemmingway novel, as he was very popular in the 1950s. Boris' friend Natasha Svetsinskaya called to laugh about this imaginary book, whose title, *Monday Starts on Saturday*, indicated that life had no breaks, no weekend, and would "be forever dull."<sup>67</sup> The Strugatskys immediately started writing and a few years later, in 1964, *Monday* came into reality. They did have to make some changes to the

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<sup>66</sup>Strugatsky, "Afterword," in Strugatsky, *Monday Starts on Saturday*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Seagull Books, 2002), 241.

<sup>67</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Monday Starts*, 241.

original text due to censorship, but the 2002 edition and translation of the novel reinserts those edited parts to give a new generation of readers the complete intended picture.<sup>68</sup>

Set in the imaginary north Russian town of Solovets, *Monday Starts on Saturday* follows the extraordinary experience of Alexander “Sasha” Ivanovich Privalov at the Scientific Institute of Sorcery and Wizardry. Sasha is a computer programmer, who is driving home on holiday from his university when he encounters two men hunting in the woods, wearing capes as all wizards do, who need a ride back to their institute. The men inform Sasha that the institute is searching for a computer programmer. This was a career new to the 1960s, and an area of interest to Boris, who learned computer technology at Pulkovo Observatory.<sup>69</sup> Also headed towards the institute, Sasha had no place to stay, so the men offer Sasha a room at “The Log Hut on Chicken Legs: A historical monument of old Solovets.”<sup>70</sup> During his stay at this museum-like inn, Sasha experiences what he thinks are odd dreams with talking animals and bustling in the night, yet this is only the beginning of his adventure, as he accepts the job as computer programmer at the institute. He finds what he dreamt to be true, and that Solovets is more interesting than the average Russian town.

Three short interconnected stories divide the novel, which allow the reader to experience different aspects of the research institute, abbreviated NITWITT to emphasize its confusing nature. During the first story Sasha experiences magic for the first time with the help of his new friends and in his new job, although he is not sure what magicians need with computers. The second story introduces the audience to Sasha’s position, where he works on an Aldan high-tech

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<sup>68</sup> Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in *Monday Starts*, 243.

<sup>69</sup> Ivanov, “The Lessons,” 9.

<sup>70</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 7.

computer for the Accounts Department, and performs odd calculations that defy logic.<sup>71</sup> On New Year's Eve, Sasha must work the night watch shift, which involves preventing people from working overnight. This proves impossible with the magicians' eagerness to work. The audience receives a tour of the floors of the institute and catches glimpses of creatures such as vampires, talking heads, and Merlin. The final story features Sasha and his friends having some fun after the Aldan has set on fire when trying to calculate the meaning of life. They embark on a discussion surrounding their colleague Janus, who is one consciousness split into two people: U-Janus and A-Janus. After observing a parrot who is moving backward in time, they determine that Janus, when he was a whole being experimenting with time, had a discovery that split him in two, with one half of him moving forward and one back towards the days of the Russian Empire.<sup>72</sup>

*Monday Starts on Saturday* speaks to the intelligentsia of the 1960s by illustrating concepts that they experienced as part of Soviet society. The novel then gives validation to their views as well as a perspective on the life of Soviet scientists during the decade when the government pushed for scientific development as part of the Space Race. According to Marxist theory, technological progress was vital for the development of new societies, as previously described. In the 1950s and 1960s, the USSR focused on strengthening their industry and scientific resources to excel in the new post-war world.<sup>73</sup> The intelligentsia played a key role in this evolution especially within the institutions and universities, which the Strugatskys drew attention to with this book.

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<sup>71</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 104.

<sup>72</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 222.

<sup>73</sup> Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2015), 46.

## The Intelligentsia and the Space Race

The Strugatskys were part of the “*Sputnik* generation”: young adults who experienced the advent of the Space Race during which Russia sent the first man into orbit, Yuri Gagarin, in 1961. The goal of the state was “technological utopianism”, a concept historian Slava Gerovitch studied in her recent work, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity*. She argued that the government sought to control the forces of nature, from the Earth to the skies, to strengthen Russia’s place on the world stage.<sup>74</sup> This included furthering industrialization and agriculture, as well as competing with the United States to reach the Moon. In the eyes of Khrushchev, the educated citizens of Russia had a leading role in this respect, due to their position as cultural role models to the rest of society. Whereas Stalin termed these role models “toiling intelligentsia”, Khrushchev created a “New Scientific Intelligentsia” with the intention that they would continue to lead Russia into the modern age.<sup>75</sup>

This New Scientific Intelligentsia was exactly the intended audience of the fresh wave of science fiction in the 1960s, which began with *Andromeda*. Ivan Yefremov was a scientist, just as Boris Strugatsky was an astronomer, therefore their writings were expressions of their own hopes for the prospects of Soviet science. It was common for many science fiction writers to have also worked in a scientific field.<sup>76</sup> The Space Race raised overall interest in science, lending to the name of the *Sputnik* generation who witnessed early great successes for their nation. This in turn caused science fiction to be more popular and more prestigious, a similar phenomenon

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<sup>74</sup> Gerovitch, *Space Mythologies*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., “Science Fiction and the Thaw,” *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 3 (2004): 342.

<sup>76</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, “SF and the Thaw,” 342.

that took place in the United States, where science fiction reached its Golden Age in the 1950s.<sup>77</sup> Science fiction had existed in Russia long before this period; however, there was a shift in themes in the literature from the 1950s onward. The 1920s and 1930s imagined the near future and inventions that had not yet come to be, yet this transitioned to the scientists expanding their view to the distant future, which benefitted them for censorship purposes and storytelling.

*Monday Begins on Saturday* was a product of the motivations and hype created by the Space Race as the world reached new technological heights. The novel teeters on the satirical as it portrays the inner workings of a Soviet institution where experiments and study on space could well be taking place, symbolized in the novel by magic. This mystical element conveys that sense of wonder that the wider audience had towards cutting-edge Soviet 1960s science, as not every reader would understand science as the Strugatskys did. It was then to everyone's benefit to portray science as something mysterious, and what better way than with magic.<sup>78</sup> Yet many would understand the chaos and sometimes absurdity of the workplace setting. The magicians even likened their craft to that of science, saying that they have the same goal in mind: human happiness.<sup>79</sup>

#### NITWITT: Soviet Science as Magic

The goal of the magicians in *Monday* is to discover the secret to happiness: where it comes from and how to attain it. There are a variety of departments in the one-building institution, including the Department of Linear Happiness, Eternal Youth, Universal

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rablun, *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 51.

<sup>78</sup> Adam Roberts, "Introduction," in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Monday Starts on Saturday* (London: Seagull Books, 2005), x.

<sup>79</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 4.

Transformations and Absolute Knowledge, all dedicated to the scientific study of a better life.<sup>80</sup> First that should be addressed however is the name of the academy itself, or rather, the interesting abbreviation, NITWITT. In the original Russian, the letters together translate to “it doesn’t matter” or “nothing.”<sup>81</sup> Reading the English translation transforms the word into ‘nitwit’, a term for a fool or someone who does not know. This refers to the uselessness of this research institution’s goal, symbolic of the Soviet Union striving for a technologically utopian future that may defy belief and a government reaching for an unattainable goal.

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky included philosophical thoughts often in their works, in the form of a page or two in which they seemed lost in their own thoughts while writing, but also encouraging the audience to think things over for themselves. In the 1960s they stayed aware of socialist realism and the party ideology, with the underlying hope that the bright future was on the horizon. The meaning of life provided the audience with something to consider, as it is an ambitious project to which none of the magicians discovered an answer. Sasha works out his thoughts for the audience to read, and his philosophical tangent cannot help but sound like the musings of the authors themselves. As Sasha ponders, he realizes that for all the research done, “happiness lies in the constant cognition of the unknown, which is also the meaning of life.” Sasha values life-long learning, but also labor and self-improvement without which man may return to simpler times.<sup>82</sup> He concludes that men must work together and yet also experience life outside the institute, something that he feels the magicians do not do. Their research isolates the magicians, leaving them ignorant of how the rest of society functions. Boris Strugatsky took

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<sup>80</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 96, 104-106.

<sup>81</sup> Roberts, “Introduction,” in Strugatsky, *Monday Starts on Saturday*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Seagull Books, 2002), viii.

<sup>82</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 120-121.

advantage of his ability to leave the Soviet academy and instead turn to his fictional imagination, and he and Arkady called to the intelligentsia to embrace that they are a unique group of society striving to benefit their nation and themselves. No matter how chaotic and far-fetched their research may seem, the objective remains for the greater good.

### The Strugatskys on the Key to Happiness

In both *Monday Starts on Saturday* and *Hard to Be a God*, the writers speculate on how society can achieve happiness. In *Monday*, the magician Vybegallo studies this concept exclusively. Vybegallo's gruesome experiment involves breeding three types of men: one not satisfied in any respect, one not satisfied with food, and one with all needs met, or so the magician thinks.<sup>83</sup> The first man is born deformed and babbling nonsense for a few minutes and then dies. The second experiment is constantly preoccupied with eating and Vybegallo tries and fails to teach him culture. The magician explains that man can create total satisfaction with genetically modified foods and objects. The second man also dies shortly after from overconsumption. According to Adam Roberts in the Introduction to the English translation of *Monday*, Vybegallo is representative of Soviet scientist Trofim Lysenko, head of the Institute of Genetics until 1965, who sought to make the perfect hybrid crop that could eliminate Russian hunger.<sup>84</sup> Lysenko did not believe in the science of genetics, and Stalin adopted this view with Khrushchev continuing the trend, stifling the biological sciences until Lysenko fell out of favor.

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<sup>83</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 84.

<sup>84</sup> Susanne Bauer, "Mutations in Soviet Public Health Science: Post-Lysenko Medical Genetics, 1969–1991," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 47, Part A (Sept. 2014): 163. Roberts, "Introduction," in Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, ix.



Vybegallo is an outsider in the institute, portrayed as misunderstanding the concept of happiness, and wanting only attention from the press.

Readers hardly learn about the third man in the experiment, as when he hatches outside in what Vybegallo hopes will be a spectacle for the press, the man causes an explosion and is gone in an instant, leaving behind material valuables, such as jewelry and the reporter's cameras, in the resulting hole in the ground. Sasha's friend explains what Vybegallo cannot: "...that a genuine mental giant is less interested in consuming than in thinking and feeling."<sup>85</sup> Vybegallo unintentionally created a man who wanted only material wealth, and so was extremely selfish and egotistical that he was unable to survive on Earth. Purposely vague, the third man may have disappeared into space, in search of more material gains, or perhaps was so unsatisfied that he could not survive, as the first experiments could not. Science alone cannot make man happy because he needs to feel and think for himself, but Vybegallo cannot see this.

*Hard to Be a God* brings up a similar concept in two shorter conversations between Anton and his acquaintances. First is with Arata, a disjointed rebel leader from Arkanar who thinks that no matter what accomplishments he has, he is always powerless. What he asks of Anton is power in the form of a weapon, for Anton to use his hidden technology that Arata has caught glimpses of, such as his helicopter. This causes Anton to utter the title phrase, "It's hard to be a god."<sup>86</sup> Arata asks for lightening to destroy evil, but Anton worries about where the lightening will go after Arata dies, knowing that weapons can easily end up in the wrong hands. Arata suggests the defeat of the ruling class, yet Anton counters that the strongest of the weak

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<sup>85</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 156.

<sup>86</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 215.

will rise to take their place. In another conversation with his friend Dr. Budach, Anton discusses specifically what man needs to be happy. Budach suggests a variety of options, such as removing the oppressors and giving the people everything they need, but Anton counters all his solutions. Anton concludes that if people have all that they need, then they will forget how to work and have nothing to strive for.<sup>87</sup> Finally Budach ponders hypnosis to make the perfect human mindset, and Anton reflects on how Earth had also considered this, but concluded that to do so was to remove history and humanity and start over. The Strugatskys envisioned a bleak outlook on Soviet society through this scene, depicting the government as seeking to mold the perfect person through propaganda. Simultaneously, the Strugatskys suggested that man needs more than material wealth to be happy.

The Strugatskys expressed their philosophical thoughts through these scenes in which the characters debate on what society needs to be happy. Vybegallo considered his experiments to be variations of the universal consumer, but each one was unable to survive with only material objects to consume.<sup>88</sup> Anton argues with his friends on a subject that has no clear answer, as there always seems to be a malevolent force to consider, that force often man himself. According to Darko Suvin's literary studies of science fiction, the genre focuses on estrangement, placing the audience into an unknown world, but this world often not only resembles the world they know but also invites readers to critique it.<sup>89</sup> The Strugatskys invited their peers to do this when they took liberties and included deep thought into their works.

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<sup>87</sup> Strugatsky, *Hard to Be a God*, 207-208.

<sup>88</sup> Strugatsky, *Monday Starts*, 145.

<sup>89</sup> Darko Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," in *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn and Mathew Candelarin (Landham: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 29.

In the 1920s and 1930s, improving social welfare concerned the Soviet Union as well as Europe and America as a reaction to the tragedy of war, which led to a growth in the social sciences.<sup>90</sup> Lysenko was one product of this period, where the government strove to create a healthier state. Russia wanted to show the world that socialism could be successful, as well as prepare the country for future wars and recover their population from the earlier ones. The government also needed strong workers, “living labor machines” and spread propaganda showing that hard work led to a sense of fulfillment.<sup>91</sup> This work ethic and image of the good communist or “New Soviet Man” continued through the 1960s, but new programs did not guarantee happiness. Thus, Boris and Arkady questioned where a harmonious society would come from, showing the intelligentsia as a united group with varied opinions. In the novels, Vybagallo faced backlash from his failed experiment and Anton faced criticism from his comrade historians because of the pity he felt for Arkanar. These discussions brought the audience out of the sense of estrangement and back into reality with a new perspective that the future was up for debate, but material wealth and godlike power will not answer their questions.

### Conclusion

The 1960s Soviet Union embodied high prospects for the future, ushered in by Khrushchev and early successes in space technology, which created the opportunity for the Strugatskys to envision their communist utopia. Rather than depicting utopia, they warned society about the dangers of repeating the past, while they explored the present. The Brothers experienced first-hand the changes taking place in society and specifically the intelligentsia

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<sup>90</sup> David L. Hoffman, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 17, 21.

<sup>91</sup> Hoffman, *Cultivating the Masses*, 108.

during the decades of their lives. The Strugatskys took advantage of the fluctuations of Khrushchev's opinion on art and literature as well as his condemnation of Stalin to publish their work *Hard to Be a God*, and then put their work experience to the page with *Monday Begins on Saturday*. Together, the works express their understanding of the interrelationship of science, society and politics. This is common in many works of the genre, as one of its primary intentions is to invite readers to think critically about reality.<sup>92</sup> The Strugatskys exposed the audience to ideas for which the foundation lay in the back of their minds already, such as the likening of Stalin to Hitler in the figure of Don Reba. Society read in good humor the workday of a scientist striving towards lofty goals to contribute to the overall happiness of society. When placed into context, the novels appear much less about the utopian future than about the Strugatskys' present: what they saw developing around them, and what in history they wanted to move away from.

In an article about the role of history in science fiction novels, Ken Maclead writes that "History remains the trade secret of SF [science fiction]."<sup>93</sup> In looking back at their young adult experiences of the end of Stalin's rule and at the evolution of science and society at that time, the Strugatskys imagined what could happen next. MacLead goes on to write that science fiction reflects on the far history of feudalism, as in *Hard to Be a God*, in conjunction with technological progress that claims to move society forward. These layers stack up on the

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<sup>92</sup> Scholes and Rablun, *Science Fiction*, 114.

<sup>93</sup> Ken MacLead, "History in SF: What (Hasn't Yet) Happened in History," in *Histories of the Future: Studies in Fact, Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Alan Sandison and Robert Dingley (New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2000), 9.

underlying issue of science fiction that is present politics.<sup>94</sup> The Strugatskys caused their society, the intelligentsia and the bearers of progress, to question if any progress was indeed taking place.

Arkady and Boris stayed optimistic that society could leave history behind and that the future was malleable in the 1960s, but by the end of the decade their outlook began to shift. The Party removed Nikita Khrushchev from power in 1964, creating a change in government during the years in which the Strugatskys published these novels. A period of collective leadership followed Khrushchev's removal, but Leonid Brezhnev quickly became the primary leader of the Soviet Union. It was during these years that the Strugatsky works changed as the authors grew older, the Space Race less captivating and the future more unpredictable.

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<sup>94</sup> MacLead, "History and SF," 10.

## CHAPTER 2 THE EARLY BREZHNEV YEARS: LATE 1960s-EARLY 1970s

“...the “Golden Age” of Soviet SF didn’t last long. In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, SF, like our whole culture, began to feel the influence of forces that were taking the upper hand in society and that led to the period of stagnation.” – Arkady Strugatsky<sup>95</sup>

In 1918, Lenin published a pamphlet entitled “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government”, and one item on his list was to adopt the modern technologies and scientific practices of Western capitalist nations. According to Lenin, although the bourgeoisie dominated these nations, the socialist experiment depended on the success of using this technology to modernize.<sup>96</sup> Later, in the 1960s, Russia saw success with their space program and nuclear power, keeping pace with the West at least superficially. The intelligentsia during this time had what Arkady described as “a romantic faith in science”, causing them to be receptive to science fiction.<sup>97</sup> However, by the end of the decade and into the 1970s, a series of events sparked the decline of the intelligentsia faith in the Soviet system simultaneously with decreased interest in science.

During this period, the Strugatsky Brothers explored aliens, which gave them leeway to imagine futuristic technology and the evolution of man. Two novels, *The Ugly Swans* (1972) and *Roadside Picnic* (1972) demonstrated their concerns regarding the government and scientific development, and testified to the emerging doubt that the future was as bright as Khrushchev and

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<sup>95</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, “Science Fiction Teaches,” 2.

<sup>96</sup> V. I. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,” in *Lenin’s Collected Works*, 4th English Edition, Volume 27, ed. Robert Daglish and tran. by Clemens Dutt, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 235-77. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/mar/x03.htm>. Original source: *Pravda*, no. 83 (Moscow, 1918).

<sup>97</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, “Science Fiction Teaches,” 2.

Soviet leaders promised it would be. The Strugatskys also began to fall out of favor with the government and struggled to have these novels published. Audiences read *The Ugly Swans* as *samizdat*, literature banned by the state that was disseminated and enjoyed in secret. These two popular Strugatsky novels conclude with uncertainty for the fate of the characters, a fitting theme as the authors were also unsure of where the future headed for the Soviet Union.

### The Intelligentsia after Khrushchev

The liberal period of the Thaw ended after the removal of Khrushchev from power, and writers faced increasing obstacles to publishing in the USSR. Scholars of Russian authors, Stephen Lovell and Rosalind Marsh, examined the “gradual disillusionment” of the intelligentsia from the death of Stalin onwards, and identified key events that bred discontent through expressions in literature.<sup>98</sup> One of the first events was the Sinyavsky-Daniel Trial in 1966, which resulted in two authors, Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuri Daniel, imprisoned for writing and publishing anti-Soviet literature.<sup>99</sup> As they were intelligentsia, other intellectuals realized they were not safe from imprisonment or exile if they wrote contrary to the party line. The intelligentsia protested the sentences of Sinyavsky and Daniel, and as it was early in Leonid Brezhnev’s period, he made some small concessions. More literature was published if it was pro-Soviet, even if it was not well written, and some previously banned classic works, both Russian and foreign, were also published.<sup>100</sup> Sometimes used as a marker for the end of the Thaw, the

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<sup>98</sup> Stephen Lovell and Rosalind Marsh, “Culture and Crisis: The Intelligentsia and Literature after 1953,” in *Russian Cultural Studies*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford University Press, 1998), 57.

<sup>99</sup> Geoffrey F. Peterson, “The Soviet Censorship and Samizdat,” *The Image of the Twentieth Century in Literature, Media, and Society* (2000): 79.

<sup>100</sup> Lovell and Marsh, “Culture and Crisis,” 64.

trial also launched the start of the dissident movement among writers.<sup>101</sup> Although the Strugatskys were not part of this movement, their works began to lose the initial optimism as bleak settings and unsure futures started to dominate their books. The growing perseverance of the dissidents signaled a divide among writers and unhappiness with the actions of the government. This left the Strugatskys to walk a thin line to continue their career.

The minor concessions of Brezhnev to the writers really served as short-term distractions as further events caused increasing upset among the educated and brought more permanence to the dissident movement. In August 1968, Russia invaded Czechoslovakia to stop the Prague Spring and give support for the communist reforms there. Shortly afterward intending to justify the invasion, the Brezhnev Doctrine proclaimed the Soviet Union would act to preserve communism in Eastern Europe. On August 25<sup>th</sup>, five days after the invasion, protesters including the intelligentsia gathered in Moscow's Red Square to demonstrate against the government's action. Additionally, in the following years, liberal journals saw the removal of editors, signaling a return to stricter censorship. The government expelled famous Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn from the country in 1974 and this produced further unrest.<sup>102</sup> Several negative developments in the Space Race also bred disillusionment and dampened enthusiasm among the people. Nevertheless, science fiction, and the Strugatskys especially, remained widely popular until the mid-1970s when censorship created more obstacles for publication, especially of thought-provoking works. Thus, the increasing negativity and vagueness of their writings indicated the feelings of uncertainty and protest of their readers towards the government during the early Brezhnev period.

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<sup>101</sup> Sandle, "A Triumph," 143.

<sup>102</sup> Lovell and Marsh, "Culture and Crisis," 64.



In 1973, a group of Russian émigré literati in the field of literature met in the United States for a conference on Soviet censorship. Held by the Institute for the Study of the USSR from Munich, Germany, and by Radio Liberty, the conference was to draw attention to cultural restrictions in Russia. The attendees fled Russia to escape persecution and some had spent time in labor camps or under arrest due to their writings. Their opinions on the state of Russian literature varied; for instance, Anatoly Kuznetsov believed that great literature cannot exist under censorship, while others supported the creative ways writers still expressed their opinions in their works.<sup>103</sup> Yuri Demin, a Finnish writer who served in the Red Army in the Russian Civil War who left the USSR because of the repression of free speech, identified three types of writers: right wing conformists, dissidents and those somewhere in between.<sup>104</sup> The latter group resembles the “lost” intelligentsia and the Strugatsky Brothers. The Strugatskys, while not taking too much of a risk, fought for their work to keep as much original text as possible; however, the editors required extensive editing for both *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic*.

Arkady Strugatsky said in an interview in 1988 that the 1970s saw a downturn in the world of science fiction.<sup>105</sup> Soviet-appropriate literature of the genre was restricted in themes to favorably reflect the government, and experimental writings were often considered by the censors to be pushing the boundaries too far. Brezhnev’s conservative leadership embodied a sense of returning to normalcy in search of stability for the nation. There were changes in the Young Guard publishing house that affected science fiction and the Strugatskys directly, as the

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<sup>103</sup> Dewhirst and Farrel, *The Soviet Censorship*, 8, 31.

<sup>104</sup> Dewhirst and Farrel, *The Soviet Censorship*, 37.

<sup>105</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, “Science Fiction Teaches,” 4.

government specifically approved the house to publish science fiction.<sup>106</sup> In 1973, the Young Guard hired Yuri Medvedev to head the publishing company. Medvedev was a Communist party member and enthusiast, eager to prove his loyalty through strict enforcement of the rules.<sup>107</sup> Thus the office cracked down on approval of risky works and adopted an overall harsher policy towards science fiction, having previously been a supporter of the genre. The Strugatskys faced lengthy struggles with the Young Guard for years to come, and Medvedev's successor, Vladimir Shcherbakov, only continued the conservative viewpoint.<sup>108</sup>

These events contributed to a sense of re-Stalinization that the Brezhnev leadership created. Leonid Brezhnev was born in the Ukraine in 1906 to a working family, and entered factory labor upon graduating. He advanced his career through the Communist Party. Similarly to Khrushchev, Brezhnev was seen as "simple man", not formally educated in politics.<sup>109</sup> In assisting the government with the removal of Khrushchev in 1964, Brezhnev consolidated his position as a top member of the party, and became the face of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev became a drastically different leader than Khrushchev, and brought an end to the Thaw period of liberalization, instead cracking down on personal freedoms of expression. Some historians choose to separate the Brezhnev era into two halves, first when he played a more active role in the government (late 1960s-early 1970s) and the hands-off second half where he became more sickly (mid-1970s-1982). For the purposes of this argument, this division of time will also be used to identify Strugatsky development.

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<sup>106</sup> Young Guard publishing house is also known as Molodaya Guardia in Russian.

<sup>107</sup> Simon, "Political Context," 392.

<sup>108</sup> Simon, "Political Context," 393.

<sup>109</sup> Edwin Bacon, "Reconsidering Brezhnev," in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2002), 8.

Harsher treatment of dissidents and economic stagnation characterized the second half of Brezhnev's career. Brezhnev became a distant leader as time went on and he entered his 70s, entrusting decision-making responsibility to others.<sup>110</sup> The economic stagnation of the 1970s stemmed from a political standstill, according to historian Moshe Lewin, as the Politburo could not find a majority to remove the aging Brezhnev.<sup>111</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, who became the leader of the USSR in 1985, would refer to Brezhnev's "neo-Stalinist line" as a campaign tactic to bring change to Russia. Yet, stagnation also brought more predictability after years of Khrushchev's chaotic reforms.

Brezhnev's cracking down on dissidents and foreign policy decisions contributed to the intelligentsia slow loss of faith through the 1970s, and directly affected the Strugatskys as science fiction became less acceptable and editors pushed back against their novels. However, the Brothers remained productive, holding on to some of their novels for later publication. Among many works, they wrote two key novels during this time, *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic*, both involving more alien-related themes that continued to question the future of the government, science and humans. Due to similarities in the novels, they will be discussed jointly after initial brief summaries of individual content.

### *The Ugly Swans*

In the late 1960s, Arkady and Boris wrote their novel *The Ugly Swans* for publication in a literary journal, but the censors intervened and blocked the publication. This begun a string of problems for the Brothers lasting into the 1970s. The story pits science and human evolution

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<sup>110</sup> Bacon, "Reconsidering Brezhnev," 2.

<sup>111</sup> Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, 261.

against the controlling government and a dull society. Featuring a writer who seeks to break free from what are appropriate thoughts and motivations for a Soviet man, the novel toyed with abstract concepts of good. A German publisher produced the novel in Europe, unbeknownst to the Strugatskys, in 1972, and the Brothers protested this to show they were not involved with the leak of their novel to the West. Yet the publication in the West caused publishing houses to near-blacklist the Brothers.<sup>112</sup> However, audiences continued to read *The Ugly Swans* in the Soviet Union as *samizdat*, banned literature, so the people could still have read the work. In 1987, Russians could freely read the novel in their own language, and in 2006, Konstantin Lopushansky directed the first cinematic version as well.

*The Ugly Swans* follows the experience of writer Victor Banev, who is staying at a resort hotel, with his girlfriend Diana, in a town where it is always raining. Banev traveled to this town to check on his daughter, Irma, at the request of his estranged wife. Irma attends a school for special students, a class of highly intelligent children, but her mother worries about her increasingly distant personality. The school warmly welcomes Banev, inviting him to give a talk on his fiction works, to which he accepts. The young students surprise him when they ask him questions regarding what makes a man intelligent, the military-industrial complex and the definition of progress.<sup>113</sup> Banev himself is not a fan of the government of his unnamed nation, but is asked by an official to write a paper on a new phenomenon in the town: slimies. Slimies are humans with a form of misunderstood genetic disease that gives them yellow circles around the eyes and always damp skin.

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<sup>112</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, "Science Fiction Teaches," 2.

<sup>113</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 65-70.

The slimies live in a guarded facility, but are able to go in and out when allotted. However, the townspeople treat the slimies as outsiders when the slimies are out for an errand or a walk. Over the years they have been attracting the children to them and even teaching the children at the special school which Banev's daughter attends. Banev meets people knowledgeable about this phenomenon and learns that slimies are a type of evolved human with a superior intellect, for which they have voluntarily sacrificed emotion. A famous philosopher-turned-slimey by his own choosing asks Banev to write a piece on the colony from an empathetic insider perspective. Banev knows there are risks to this, as it would be challenging to the town government. Further in the novel, the slimies call all the children into the compound to live. The parents, panicked, flee the town, except for Banev and Diana, who is also a friend of the slimies. Suddenly, the rain finally stops, and Banev and Diana survey the town, which looks as if the rain washed it clean. The rain is a metaphor for the slimies' plan for starting a new world, a new beginning for this breed of human being to establish a world of good.

### *Roadside Picnic*

The Strugatskys wrote *Roadside Picnic* in the early 1970s but the novel would ultimately spend eight years going from one publishing company to another, frequently sent back for further changes to its language and plot.<sup>114</sup> The book was intended to be part of an anthology with two other Strugatsky works, *Space Mowgli* and *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel*, and during the eight years the editors made so many changes, that this anthology was never published as

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<sup>114</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Roadside Picnic*, 202.

intended.<sup>115</sup> Instead, *Hard to Be a God* replaced *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel*, but then editors even removed that, and so the anthology consisted only of *Space Mowgli* and a heavily revised *Roadside Picnic*, published in 1980 in Russia. In his reminiscing of this process in the Afterword of the 2014 edition of *Roadside Picnic*, Boris Strugatsky states that the finished Soviet anthology was “unpleasant to even hold in my hands, never mind read.”<sup>116</sup> A publisher in the United States published an unedited *Roadside Picnic* in 1977.

In 1978 the novel was second runner up for the John W. Campbell Award for best science fiction work, losing only to *Gateway* by Frederik Pohl and followed by *A Scanner Darkly* by Philip K. Dick.<sup>117</sup> It would only be after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 that Russians could freely read the original edition in their own language.<sup>118</sup> However, literary journals published parts of the novel in the 1970s in the USSR, and it circulated as underground literature.<sup>119</sup> Part of the resistance to publishing the novel was a change of tide in the attitudes of the government towards the Strugatskys. Although they and their genre remained popular among the people, Brezhnev's conservatism was spreading, as the Young Guard publishing house was evident of. This caused loss of jobs in the publishing industry for those who supported science fiction and non-conservative views.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel*, trans. Josh Billings (New York: Melville House, 2015). First published 1970. Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Space Mowgli*, trans. Roger DeGaris (London: Macmillan, 1982). First published 1971.

<sup>116</sup> Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in *Roadside Picnic*, 202, 209.

<sup>117</sup> “The John W. Campbell Memorial Award,” *KU Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction*, last modified 2017. <http://www.sfcenter.ku.edu/campbell.htm>. Frederik Pohl, *Gateway* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977). Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

<sup>118</sup> Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Roadside Picnic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>119</sup> Simon, “Political Context,” 395.

<sup>120</sup> Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in *Roadside Picnic*, 198.

Boris Strugatsky preserved letters of the correspondence that he and his brother had with the Young Guard publishing house, and chose to discuss them in the Afterword for the 2014 edition of *Roadside Picnic*. The letters include the Young Guard's rejections of the novel, petitions of the authors against these decisions and calls by the Brothers for information, as the Young Guard editors were slow to respond. The Brothers exchanged letters between themselves also, as they considered who to contact, including higher levels of the government.<sup>121</sup> Boris saved eighteen pages of comments from the Young Guard, divided into these sections: "Concerning the Immoral Behavior of the Heroes," "Concerning Physical Violence," and "About Vulgarisms and Slang Expressions." Examples of changes the editors wanted made included references to alcohol and excessive drinking, of which the main character was guilty, physical fighting between characters, and terms like "hell" and "scum."<sup>122</sup> The Young Guard justified these changes by claiming that the book's intended audience was a younger generation who expected literature to teach life lessons. Using this definition, *Roadside Picnic* certainly faced a struggle to meet publishing standards.<sup>123</sup>

The novel follows the life of Redrick "Red" Schuart and his experience in the Zone: an area where aliens landed years ago, leaving behind a physics-defying and dangerous mess. It begins when Red is just 23 years old and working for the International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures as an assistant, striving to leave behind his days as a stalker: someone who illegally sneaks into the Zone to steal items the aliens left behind and who sells the objects in black-market avenues. The world is unaware of why the aliens came to Earth, as the aliens

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<sup>121</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Roadside Picnic*, 201-202.

<sup>122</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Roadside Picnic*, 204-205.

<sup>123</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *Roadside Picnic*, 204.

made no effort to communicate with humans. There are six Zones throughout the world, as another character Dr. Pillman, explains in the “Preface” to the novel, and the zones appear to be on a curve as if they were shots fired from a distant point in space towards the rotating Earth.<sup>124</sup> Other than this discovery, Earth lacks knowledge about the extraterrestrial event which took place thirty years before the start of the book.

Red lives outside the town of Harmont, and as the story progresses so do the effects of the Zone on the town. The Zone also affects Red’s family: His child has been born with yellow hair all over her body and has black eyes. Other children of stalkers are born with similar defects and as they grow older they become increasingly robotic and unemotional. The main plot sends Red searching for a specific item desired by a friend’s son, Arthur: The Golden Sphere, that can grant any wish. Arthur and Red venture into the Zone, barely surviving, and discover the Sphere in its depths. A mysterious force kills Arthur before he reaches the Sphere. In Arthur’s name, Red wishes for what Arthur had wanted: “HAPPINESS, FREE FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!”<sup>125</sup> This is the end of the novel, so the readers do not see Red’s wish come true, leaving happiness up to the reader’s imaginations.

#### Seen and Unseen: The Character of Authority

In the 1960s, the Strugatskys discussed the Soviet government’s past in their work *Hard to Be a God*, by remembering the violence of Stalinism in hopes of preventing its comeback. In the early 1970s books, there is still authority that the protagonist opposes, yet these works are less overtly political than *Hard to Be a God*. *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic* portray the

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<sup>124</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 1-2.

<sup>125</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 193



government as an obstacle to work around rather than a threat or an enemy, and the main characters work for the government at some point. Cognitive estrangement theory of Darko Suvin, which holds that science fiction seeks to place the reader into a world that resembles their own, but is more complex, helps us better grasp the importance of these works.<sup>126</sup> In these two stories, fictional elements of aliens and human evolution cloud the norm, but the characters are relatable and just as perplexed as the reader by the strange happenings. The deliberately vague locations could be anywhere, and naturally the reader would fill in gaps with their own experience.

### The Police Presence

In *The Ugly Swans*, Victor Banev tries to stay on the good side of the local authorities, until their mistreatment of the slimies becomes too unjust for him to stand aside. Banev tries to follow the rules of the town, but he does not agree with the treatment of slimies as lepers of society. Banev faces law enforcement in this small town, and the police and undercover agents he encounters resemble a similar relationship to that of Red's with police in *Roadside Picnic*. In the first chapter of *Picnic*, Red encounters the police, who are described as wearing helmets that cover their eyes, a description which obscures their individual personality and reduces them to a stereotype.<sup>127</sup> Red knows a police captain, who is relieved to find out that Red is working for the Institute now, so his entry into the Zone is official and not illegal stalker business. The captain lets him go, but the police do not leave Red in peace, as the need to support his family drives him back to stalking. Thus, the key role of the police from the perspective of Red is to hunt the

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<sup>126</sup> R. Doug Davis and Lisa Yaszeh, "Reading Science Fiction's Interdisciplinary Conversation with Science and Technology Studies," *Reading Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr and Matthew Candelaria (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2009), 184.

<sup>127</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 38.

stalkers. The police are always on the lookout for stalkers not only around the Zone, but in the town looking out for black market exchanges. The Institute also has security to prevent the stalkers from going into the Zone, but Red is clever and experienced enough to circumvent them every time.

Victor Banev similarly discovers that his friend Pavor Summan, a sanitary worker, is a foreign spy, and Banev tips off the police, who arrest him. Banev is careful to play both sides of the field, denouncing Pavor to the authorities in one chapter while later refusing to write a government-solicited paper on the slimies as villains after he learns more about them. During the Soviet era, one could write a denunciation, or a “derailment” against someone, officially testifying doubt of this person’s loyalty.<sup>128</sup> Denunciations could protect oneself if the subject was found guilty, especially if the subject of the denunciation wrote a derailment against you. Banev takes this action when he receives word that Pavor is working against the government, even though Banev is not an ardent supporter of the government himself. However, it was something he simply had to do. Still, regardless of how the authorities impact the lives of the characters, they are powerless against the supernatural elements around them. The Zone remains deadly and the slimies succeed in washing the town clean of the non-understanding humans. The slimies themselves and the children who follow them are also rebelling against the natural order that the government presides over.

### The Politicians and the Aliens

The authors maintain a degree of ambiguity throughout *Swans* and *Picnic* allowing for much interpretation from the audience. When comparing three works of Strugatsky fiction,

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<sup>128</sup> Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 32.

literary scholar Simonetta Salvestoni wrote of *Roadside Picnic* as a “mirroring fiction” to *Hard to Be a God*.<sup>129</sup> In *God*, Anton, the historian from Earth, occupies an unfamiliar world which he has power to control, as he is part of the superior civilization. In *Picnic*, humans play the opposite role, because the aliens that have visited Earth represent stronger civilization beyond human understanding or control. The humans on Earth are unable to control the aliens, who leave the humans rummaging through alien debris to learn all they can, which ultimately equates to very little. Thus, the alien remnants create tension in *Picnic*, as the humans struggle to both understand and control the Zone. Meanwhile, in *The Ugly Swans*, the slimies also cause pressure on the townspeople while Banev find himself in conflict with the local politician’s way of governing.

In *The Ugly Swans*, Victor Banev has an inside view of what one of the town politicians spends his nights doing, which reflects poorly on politicians in Soviet reality. Residing in the same resort hotel as Banev is member of parliament Rosheper Nant, and Banev witnesses Nant’s all-night parties, complete with half-naked women, billiards, and booze. This becomes a common occurrence as a drunken Nant yammers on about the laws he plans to enact against the slimies, whom he set barbaric traps for.<sup>130</sup> This dirty, corrupt and unempathetic politician is a character that multiple audiences can understand and appreciate. Many members of the intelligentsia came from small towns, where they may have known their local party bosses and their immoral ways.

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<sup>129</sup> Simonetta Salvestoni, “The Ambiguous Miracle in Three Novels by the Strugatsky Brothers,” trans. Raphael Aceto and RMP, *Science Fiction Studies* 11, no. 3 (1984): 195.

<sup>130</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 32, 37.

Banev is aware that the government is keeping an eye on him and on his writing, indicating that in his fictional world, publishing works much like Soviet reality. Explaining how he writes stories that are acceptable to the government, Banev says:

I read the speeches of Mr. President, memorize heroic sagas,  
go to party meetings. Then, when I start to throw up – not when I start  
to get nauseous, but when I start to throw up – I go to work.<sup>131</sup>

Yet Banev does not work to undermine his government, instead he occupies a complex position in-between conformity and rebellion. Government rhetoric sickens him, but he must consume it to write appropriately, just as the intelligentsia would learn Party ideology for similar uses.

Banev's mindset is that of the "lost" intelligentsia, and his understanding of his world is akin to the Strugatskys' view of Soviet society during the early Brezhnev period.

It is important to note that the slimies attract children and in turn awaken the children to an envisioned future, which remains ambiguous. In *Picnic*, it is the also children of the stalkers who are taking on new forms which are robotic and unemotional. The future belongs to the younger generation in these novels, while in reality it was controlled by an aging party.<sup>132</sup> By 1975, when *Swans* was circulating underground and *Picnic* was undergoing editing, Brezhnev was 69 years old, and almost all party officials were near to him in age. After Brezhnev's death in office at age 75, Yuri Andropov proceeded him, aged 68, and died fifteen months later. Following Andropov's short tenure was Konstantin Chernenko, aged 73, who passed away in office the next year. The children could be a comment on the absence of young party leaders who

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<sup>131</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 53.

<sup>132</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 277.

could pave the way towards the utopian future. On the surface, the children have already adapted to the changes in the world that the main characters struggle to comprehend. The children embody and embrace change, while the world outside the novel faced the oncoming stagnation of Brezhnev's government.

In *Roadside Picnic*, the Strugatskys keep the setting vague, giving minute details to show that it is not in Russia, but an unassuming distant small town, discerned by some scholars to possibly be Canada.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, the Party and KGB are absent, but the Soviet scientific institution does make its appearance and plays a foil to Red, the protagonist. Scientists work at the International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures with direct access to the Zone, which they explore to bring back objects for study. Red is an assistant to a scientist in the first part of the novel, as he had knowledge of the Zone from his earlier stalker days. Even in this position, the police are suspicious of him. At a bar, an Immigration Agent approaches Red. The agent's task is to encourage people to leave the town of Harmont, which had already lost much of its population since the aliens landed.<sup>134</sup> Immigration pays for the relocation of those who choose to leave, and the agent even offers to pay Red's education in Europe. Red refuses, citing the complexity of life in Europe: "strikes, demonstrations, the never-ending politics...To hell with your Europe!"<sup>135</sup>

Red would prefer the bleak town with an alien Zone over life in Europe because the town does not have political conflict. The Strugatskys did travel throughout Europe during their career, and Arkady traveled in East Asia as a Japanese translator, but neither brother ever defected from the USSR, even when they faced blacklisting. Through their writings they initially

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<sup>133</sup> Irina Kaspe, "The Meaning of (Private) Life, or Why Do We Read the Strugatskys?" *Russian Studies in Literature* 47, no. 4 (2011): 56.

<sup>134</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 40.

<sup>135</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 43.

sought to give constructive criticism for their nation while reaffirming their dedication to the Motherland. Their characters carefully tread the fine line between doing what they think is right and doing what the government mandates them to do, which the Strugatskys also sought in the novels from this period in their career. The role of the government and authorities in *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic* is not entirely positive, but the Strugatskys believed that it was their role as writers to communicate hopes, fears and reality to the people who shared those same thoughts.<sup>136</sup>

### Science After the Decline of the Space Race

During the 1970s, society began to lose interest in the Space Race and the Scientific-Technological revolution that the Party under Khrushchev saw as vital to the modernization of Russia. Slava Gerovitch notes 1967 as the turning point for this change; specifically, a failed space mission when the spacecraft *Soyuz 1* crashed upon its return flight and the astronaut Vladimir Komarov died, the first such death of its kind.<sup>137</sup> The following year, Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space in 1961, died in a training accident, and in the next year, 1969, the United States successfully landed on the moon, the first nation to do so. The government and the people started to downplay the role of space science after these failures, yet the Strugatsky Brothers still succeeded in captivating audiences with their works, as the social commentary of science fiction remained appealing. The philosophical *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic* center on the human race as it faced alien technology and mysterious happenings, their imagination reaching

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<sup>136</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, "Science Fiction Teaches," 7.

<sup>137</sup> Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 7, 19.

far beyond the science of their day to maintain the interest of readers who saw the first men in space.

Both novels by Boris and Arkady feature a new type of human, which could be either the next evolution of the human species, or extraneous mutations. In *The Ugly Swans*, the slimies are first thought to be victims of some kind of disease equated with leprosy, but the readers later discover that it has been a choice to be transformed this way, and those with a certain understanding of the world can reach the level of intellect that the slimies have and are passing on to select children. The goal of the children and the slimies is to start a new world by improving the old; however, the children are condescending towards members of society that they consider low class, “scum”, in addition to those who benefit from war and the military-industrial complex. The students believe that these people do not contribute to society and are holding the world back.<sup>138</sup> The children interview Banev to learn about society because he writes about struggling people, the “scum” in the students’ eyes. One student tells him, “Every well-known author expressed the ideology of his society or of a part of that society,...” indicating they read Banev’s books to learn about the present.<sup>139</sup> The Strugatskys leave it up to the reader to determine whether the kind of progress that the children envision, ridding society of certain people, is a good thing. Banev, a man hardened by war, should serve as a contrast to the innocent children, and yet they have the bleaker view of society. Thus, the so-called ‘evolved’ group of slimies and children see the world in a negative light, hoping to wash it clean and start again, while Banev empathizes with all of society.

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<sup>138</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 70.

<sup>139</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 76.

Perhaps the slimies reminded readers of the Nazi regime, or of Stalin's purges, in that both governments were looking to cleanse society of the "enemies" and to shape the world to their liking, but the slimies also play the role of the intelligentsia themselves. Educated people, commissioned by the government or driven by their own desire to make the world a better place through scholarship, have this in common with the slimies. As this is science fiction however, the slimies' concept of the future is vague, grand and sounds impossible to the reader, because the slimies seek to start a new world without destroying the old.<sup>140</sup> Simonetta Salvestroni suggests that through Banev's voice, the Strugatskys invite their audience to question the meaning of utopian vision. Banev is never sure what he wants, while the ambiguity of the new world both interests and disquiets him.<sup>141</sup>

In both novels, children play a necessary role in adding the "science" to the fiction and ushering in what appears to be a new phase in humanity's journey. In *Roadside Picnic*, Red's fur-covered daughter, nicknamed Monkey, slowly becomes less human, as she loses her ability to understand anything anyone says to her. A doctor tells her parents that she has no human qualities left, and even suggests that the aliens were returning to invade Earth by taking over the bodies of the children.<sup>142</sup> Present throughout the Cold War years was the fear of nuclear war, and the implications of radiation on society. The ending of World War II with the bombing of Japan took hundreds of thousands of lives in a matter of seconds, and many more over the course of the next decades from side effects of radiation. While this is not the central focus of the

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<sup>140</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 71.

<sup>141</sup> Simonetta, "The Ambiguous Miracle," 297.

<sup>142</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 147.



novels, it feeds the audience's fears, especially the scientific-minded audience, of life in a world with nuclear power.

Rather than dazzling the audience with futuristic technology, or space exploration, the Strugatskys stay close to home, and rarely feature aliens in their works. According to Arkady in an interview from 1988, aliens are only used to suggest that Earth beings cannot put hope in them, or any embodiment of "others."<sup>143</sup> Humans must rely on themselves. In addition, these novels and other Strugatsky writings leave many questions unanswered to encourage the reader to ponder where the future might be headed. Both *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic* have open endings, where a major event in the storyline takes place moments before the last page, and there is no sequel to answer the mystery.

### The Strugatskys On the Quest for Personal Happiness

A reoccurring theme emerges from select Strugatsky works, which remains consistent over the decades of their career; as discussed in the previous chapter, they ponder what the future might look like for the average Russian citizen, and whether happiness was attainable. What do people need to be happy, and what role does the government and technological development play in that need? This theme manifests itself in different forms. In *Hard to Be a God*, the characters question god-like power in creating the perfect society, but in *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic*, happiness is a measure of self-preference. The protagonists reach their own epiphanies as to what the future needs, be that the next step in human evolution or the general wish for

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<sup>143</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, "Science Fiction Teaches," 7.

freedom and happiness. With a note of positivity, there is an allusion to the idea that the future does not yet exist, thus implying that it is susceptible to change.<sup>144</sup>

In *The Ugly Swans*, Victor Banev's occupation as a writer and close relationship with the outsiders complicates his role in society. The children try to explain to Banev that this new world may not mean the destruction of the old one, but Banev cannot fathom this. Banev counters the children's thoughts with his idea of progress: a state where society can move forward without killing each other to do so. What has succeeded in altering society in the past has been war, political reforms and science, Banev claims, three elements that the Strugatskys experienced firsthand.<sup>145</sup> Literature also makes a difference, Banev continues, because it directs the audience's mind towards viewing what society is like in reality, and points a finger at what needs to be changed. Banev reaches a level of enlightenment in *Swans* because of his role as a writer who looks to the outcasts of society to write his novels and connect with his daughter. The slimies and everyone else debate the future of humanity in this work, agreeing that literature guides the moral way, and that destructive war is not the answer.

Transitioning to *Roadside Picnic*, Red talks to longtime stalker, Burbridge (nicknamed the Vulture), about the Golden Sphere, a mystical object that can grant any wish. Burbridge confesses that if he were to find the object, he would be living carefree with his health and that of his family, and wealth to spare.<sup>146</sup> Before professing this, the Vulture had an incident in the Zone which caused the bones to disappear from his knees down, leaving him unable to search for the Golden Sphere. However, the Vulture's desire to have his wish granted passes to his son, Arthur,

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<sup>144</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 21.

<sup>145</sup> Strugatsky, *Ugly Swans*, 70-71.

<sup>146</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 60.

who convinces Red to accompany him into the Zone to look for the Sphere. During their journey, Red learns that Arthur's inmost wish is happiness and freedom for everyone, unlike his father's selfish wish. Unfortunately, one of the mysterious forces of the Zone stops Arthur before he can reach the sphere, and he dies. This causes Red to sit and think about what he wants most. His first thought is to make others pay for their wrongdoings, but then he thinks that in his whole life he has not had an original thought, possibly because he never had the opportunity to control such a power as this.<sup>147</sup> He realizes he has no idea why man is born, or what happiness means because it can be different to everyone. He repeats that "I have no words, they haven't taught me the words; I don't know how to think, those bastards didn't let me learn how to think."<sup>148</sup> As Red approaches the sphere all he can think to ask for is the words of Arthur, pushing aside all selfish intentions for the greater good.

In both novels, the characters find their own words to express their desire or that of others, be it the call for happiness for everyone or the need for fair treatment of the ostracized. Unintended irony pervades these novels, not in the literature but in the Strugatskys' reality. The struggles that the authors encountered in publishing these works, which hail to the power of words, indicate the importance of the Strugatsky influence in the Soviet Union. The Young Guard complained about violence and word choice, but it is the call to improving government and society that would most likely have incurred reaction amongst the audience. While the Strugatskys continued to write through the 1970s, they were not as productive as in the earlier decade. While this could be for a variety of reasons, *Swans* and *Picnic* likely damaged their

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<sup>147</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 191.

<sup>148</sup> Strugatsky, *Picnic*, 192.

reputation in the eyes of the government. However, for the intelligentsia audience, they continued to provide a voice much required for the lost.

### *The Ugly Swans and Stalker: Revisited on Film*

Both *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic* have cinematic versions which reinvent the Strugatskys' ideas, as interpreted by the directors. Directed by Konstantin Lopushansky and released in 2006, the less successful film version of *The Ugly Swans* builds on the original story by expressing the adaptability of humans to change. The *Roadside Picnic* incarnation is titled *Stalker* (1979), and directed by famous Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, best known for his science fiction film *Solaris* (1979), among others.<sup>149</sup> *Stalker* was recently digitally remastered for the Criterion Collection of classic films, and had its debut May 2017 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York with a high turnout. Tarkovsky worked with Boris and Arkady on the script, keeping the mystery of the Zone while adding his own image of the journey towards desire. Both films take liberties with the stories, while keeping the Strugatskys' original intent, as it stands the test of time.

*The Ugly Swans* is a lesser known modern film, deserving of a brief introduction. In this version, characters refer to the slimies as Aquatters, which Lopushansky depicted with skin like a wet suit. The children are attending school with them, where they are learning how to expand their minds and consider other worlds beyond their own. An added peaceful scene features Banev going to have lunch at a restaurant that is half underwater because of the town's never-

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<sup>149</sup> *The Ugly Swans*, directed by Konstantin Lopushansky (2006; St. Petersburg: Proline Film, 2006). *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979; Moscow: Mosfilm, 1979. Kanopy Streaming, 2017), Digital streaming from UCF Library Online Collection. *Solaris*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1973; Moscow: Mosfilm. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2014), Digital streaming from UCF Library Online Collection.

ending rain, where he comments on human's ability to appreciate beauty in anything.<sup>150</sup> The humans adapt to the weather, always wearing rain coats, and the restaurant continues to run even when flooded. These alterations aid in cementing the Strugatskys' theme of adapting to change. The most important difference comes in the ending of the film where Banev must save the children from a chemical attack on the whole town, which he carries out by shutting them in an airtight bunker. This element of chemical warfare is new to the plot, and gives a much darker and hopeless tone. The children survive, but the government sends them to an asylum-like rehabilitation center. The children are beaten to submission, but in their minds they know that they are the next step in human evolution.<sup>151</sup> Director Lopushansky depicts little hope on Earth for a harmonious future where outsiders are not isolated. As a younger director, he is less hopeful about modern Russia's ability to embrace change, depicting the government as eager to utilize weapons of war on their own people. This negativity is similar to Alexei German's version of *Hard to Be a God*.

*Stalker* features three male characters on a quest through the Zone to discover the Room, the equivalent of the Golden Sphere as it grants one's innermost wish. The men are not the same characters as in the novel; Tarkovsky renamed them so that they embody a type of personality, rather than a specific character. The Stalker, the Professor and the Writer, who live in a black and white world, sneak into the Zone where they find a land of color, mystery and danger. The search for happiness continues, as they tell each other rumors of a man who became rich from his wish in the Room, and then committed suicide one week later, and of the man who asked the Room to save his brother, but received only money, his inner desire. In the end, the three men are back at

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<sup>150</sup> Lopushansky. *The Ugly Swans*.

<sup>151</sup> Lopushansky. *The Ugly Swans*.

the bar where they began, having decided against making a wish, possibly because they are afraid of their inner selves. The Stalker's epiphany was that he wanted to help others, as in the book. He also realizes that he prefers the colorful mystery of the Zone to the dreary everyday life that he faces outside, and moves his family to live there. The final scene is his daughter, Monkey, not covered in yellow hair as in the book, but pushing a water glass across the table by gazing at it, suggesting the reality of the supernatural.

Tarkovsky's *Stalker* takes great liberties with the original Strugatsky novel *Roadside Picnic*. In a 2015 article published in the journal for *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Tarkovsky's assistant director Evgenii Tsymbal related the pre-production stage of filming to illuminate Tarkovsky's creative mind. Both the Strugatsky Brothers and the director worked together on the script, and Tsymbal recalls that Tarkovsky preferred to work with Arkady, because he was more imaginative and outgoing, contrasting Boris's more analytical mindset.<sup>152</sup> Tarkovsky found *Roadside Picnic* appealing because it addressed a topic that he himself was concerned with: "several ethical and philosophical questions concerning the meaning of life."<sup>153</sup> The entire writing process was time consuming, as Tarkovsky was working on multiple projects, but the Strugatskys contributed to the script, prepared for any backlash from government censorship, a struggle they were used to by this point.<sup>154</sup> The end result was a plot that differed from the novel in detail but preserved themes that both artists wanted to present to the audience.

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<sup>152</sup> Tsymbal, "Tarkovsky," 256.

<sup>153</sup> Tsymbal, "Tarkovsky," 258.

<sup>154</sup> Tsymbal, "Tarkovsky," 259.

However, the film did struggle against Soviet censorship, as all scripts required approval from Goskino, a film editing office.<sup>155</sup>

The recent re-release of *Stalker* by A Janus Films had a positive reception, and film critics regard the film highly today.<sup>156</sup> It spawned several video game interpretations that fused the stalker line of work with the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Soviet Ukraine suffered an explosion that spread radiation into the atmosphere and greatly affected the surrounding area, necessitating an evacuation zone approximately 1,000 square miles around the plant to keep people out.<sup>157</sup> This event took place only seven years after the film's release, and although the original novel had aliens to blame, the vagueness and distance of the aliens to the story caused similarities to be drawn between the alien Zone and the Chernobyl zone. Science fiction historically adds to the mystery and fear of nuclear power from at least as early as the Three Mile Island disaster in the United States in 1979, if not earlier. Three Mile Island was on a lesser scale than Chernobyl, whereas Chernobyl directly impacted people living in the nearby city of Pripyat.

Both films question the Soviet ideological belief that materialism does not bring happiness, and the directors support the Strugatskys' philosophical thinking on this subject. Both films, as in the novels, feature characters on a journey of self-discovery as they cope with the changes taking place in their world. Both have dark settings, as in *Hard to Be a God*, contributing to the sense that the world and Russia are going in the wrong direction. The world is

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<sup>155</sup> Kristin Roth-ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2011), 25.

<sup>156</sup> A Janus is a character in the Strugatskys' novel *Monday Starts on Saturday*.

<sup>157</sup> "Economic and Social Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident (1990)," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, last modified 2015, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/?s=chernobyl>.

bleak and it is often raining. It is only in the Zone or after the rain stops that the world is colorful again. For audiences to see these Strugatsky works on screen, adds to the overall atmosphere of the original works, keeping them alive for new generations.

### Conclusion

The early 1970s were a trying time for the artistic intelligentsia, and the freedoms that the Strugatskys had taken advantage of in the previous decade were slowly being withdrawn. After the removal of Khrushchev in 1964 and the ascension of Brezhnev to party leader shortly after, a staunch conservatism dominated the scene. The Sinyavsky-Daniel Trial in 1966 and the repercussions on the publishing industry slowed the Strugatskys productivity during this time and contributed to the growing dissident movement. In addition, the Soviet population's interest in the Space Race, where Russia previously found success and pride, was declining as the United States' achievements began to surpass that of Russia. Thus, the intelligentsia faith in the Scientific-Technological Revolution and the government faltered. Brezhnev sought to repress the growing dissident movement through various means, such as harassment, humiliation and committing writers to psychiatric hospitals.<sup>158</sup> There were monetary and party benefits for writers who supported the party ideology in their works, and this contributed to the forming of an elite group of intellectuals.<sup>159</sup> When the Strugatskys fought for their works in the editing process and did not produce tales of communist glory, they lost their chance to join this new group. The publication of their works in the West led to their near total blacklisting, as publishers shied away from anything potentially controversial in the Strugatskys' novels.

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<sup>158</sup> Sandle, "A Triumph," 150.

<sup>159</sup> Sandle, "A Triumph," 150.



Arkady Strugatsky said of science fiction in 1988 that it was “heavy artillery.”<sup>160</sup> The installation of conservative rules towards publishing bred fear in editors to step out of the party line, and science fiction publications suffered. The Strugatskys did not give up their careers, but could not always publish their works right away. Arkady explained:

We aren't interested in any other artistic form;  
we think that SF is capable of most fully embodying the  
problems that worry us- and that trouble our fellow citizens as well.<sup>161</sup>

The authors sought to imbed their understanding of the present and fear of the future into fiction. In the early 1970s, they sent for publication *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic* and struggled to get their word out to the public. Science fiction was not purely entertainment for the authors, but a powerful weapon to express the ideas of themselves and their intelligentsia peers.

Throughout *Swans* and *Picnic*, the authors addressed the disinterest in the Space Race, as well as the friction between the people and the government. The characters live among strange events, such as those who live outside the Zone, and yet the everyday people are only mildly interested. The focus is on the experience of the people themselves, and how they have changed, rather than on advanced technology or alien civilizations. Characters also encounter police and government officials looking to secure order amongst change. Among other themes in the Strugatsky writings is man's journey to self-discovery and understanding of what happiness means. For while the writers comment on the social and political situation of Russia, they also

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<sup>160</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, “Science Fiction Teaches,” 7.

<sup>161</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, “Science Fiction Teaches,” 7.

allow for their philosophical quest to permeate their works and to challenge their readers to examine their own lives and how they are contributing to the world.

As the first period of Brezhnev's time in office came to a gradual close, the Strugatskys continued writing to express their opinions of the government and life experiences. Historians generally consider the year 1973 to be the beginning of the second chapter in Brezhnev's leadership, as combined factors contributed to the slowing down of the Soviet economy and Brezhnev himself began to lose strength, mentally and physically.<sup>162</sup> Brezhnev remained party leader for the rest of the 1970s, but an Era of Stagnation ensued, marked by increasing disillusionment among the intelligentsia. The Strugatskys' writings reflect this new era, as they became more pessimistic about the communist experiment's ability to succeed.

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<sup>162</sup> Bacon, "Reconsidering Brezhnev," 14.

### CHAPTER 3 BREZHNEV AND BEYOND: THE LATE 1970s-1980s

“The flames of perestroika were just taking hold; new times were beginning, filled with prodigious promise but still as uncertain, unstable, and insubstantial as the light of an icon lamp fluttering in the wind.” – Boris Strugatsky<sup>163</sup>

After Brezhnev’s consolidation of power in the mid-1960s and his crackdown on writers and liberalism in Russia, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky faced a challenge as they continued composing science fiction that spoke to the hopes and fears of themselves and their neighbors. Brezhnev’s repression continued through the 1970s and into the 1980s under the cover of “developed socialism”, and it would not be until the late 1980s that the authors could publish two books openly critical of the Soviet government. Their writing entered a third phase of development: rather than promoting change for the better, they instead depicted hopelessness resulting from the difficulties of enacting the change they longed for. The Strugatskys wrote these books, *The Snail on the Slope* and *The Doomed City*, throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s; however, audiences could only read them in secret until the relaxation under Mikhail Gorbachev, who denounced the actions of Brezhnev in favor of free communication between the people and the government. Both novels expressed frustration with the functionality of the Soviet system and hinted at allowing democracy into Russia to give the people a voice. Such a bold move ensured difficulties ahead for the writing duo, which their established popularity could not prevent.

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<sup>163</sup> Boris Strugatsky, “Afterword,” in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016), Kindle, 460.

While Khrushchev claimed that the 1960s generation would build communism in the next two decades, Brezhnev instead adopted a rhetoric of developed socialism.<sup>164</sup> Claiming to be in a state of developed socialism allowed Brezhnev more time to reach Lenin's communist goals, as it described society as being on a gradual journey, as opposed to Khrushchev's promises of achieving full communism in a short period of time.<sup>165</sup> The 24<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1971, enacted this concept, replacing the previous "construction of communism" mantra.<sup>166</sup> Brezhnev claimed that Russia specifically had reached a point of developed socialism where other nations in the Soviet Bloc had not, so Russia could maintain its leadership role. Communism remained the goal, and all actions in the international and domestic stage took place with the intention of preserving socialism. This also allowed for Brezhnev's crackdown on samizdat and dissident writing as well as increased repression in the name of socialism.<sup>167</sup> Gorbachev's perestroika then replaced developed socialism in a departure from the neo-Stalinism of Brezhnev. However, the Soviet Union being in this new state of communism seemed just another step in prolonging utopia for society, and the future that the Strugatskys envisioned in the early 1960s faded farther from view.

### The Intelligentsia in the Late USSR

In their list of events that led to the slow disillusionment of the Soviet intelligentsia, Lovell and March named the renewed repression of Andropov and his successor to Party

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<sup>164</sup> "On Khrushchev's Phoney Communism," *Peking Review*, July 17, 1964. *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, last modified 2015, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1968-2/the-chinese-border/the-chinese-border-texts/on-khrushchevs-phoney-communism/>.

<sup>165</sup> Mark Sandle, "Brezhnev and Developed Socialism: The Ideal of *Zastoi*?" in *Brezhnev Reconsidered*, ed. Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle (London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2002), 181.

<sup>166</sup> Sandle, "Brezhnev and Developed Socialism," 166.

<sup>167</sup> Jeremi Suri, "The Promise and Failure of 'Developed Socialism': The Soviet 'Thaw' and the Crucible of the Prague Spring, 1964-1972," *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 2 (2006): 156.

Secretary Konstantin Chernenko, as one of the last actions that defeated their hope in the Soviet state. The government continued to see these educated citizens as disruptive, and the relationship between government and intelligentsia was tense.<sup>168</sup> The aging Politburo signified the lack of openness in the government and Party, and young people with new ideas did not have a voice. Graduated students realized that higher education did not guarantee a better life, as the Soviet economy continued to struggle against capitalism.<sup>169</sup> The government also worked to reduce the wage gap between blue collar workers and professionals, to the point where a worker at a successful industrial plant, who was provided food and housing, could earn more than a teacher.<sup>170</sup> Thus, the long struggle to define the role of the intelligentsia persisted as the percentage of society with higher education grew, and with it their unrest for lack of opportunity and freedoms.

From 1964, Brezhnev stayed Party leader, until his death in November of 1982. Brezhnev's government continued to stifle publications in an effort to crack down on what they believed was anti-Soviet rhetoric. After Brezhnev's death, Yuri Andropov sought to continue this repression. As a former chair of the KGB from 1967 to 1982, Andropov was tough on the dissident movement and samizdat literature.<sup>171</sup> According to a KGB memo written by Andropov to the Central Committee of the Communist Party on December 21, 1970, samizdat had undergone a change since the Sinyavsky-Daniel Trial in 1966, having transitioned in the 1970s from creative writing to political and social commentary.<sup>172</sup> Andropov's memo ascertained that

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<sup>168</sup> Lovell and Marsh, "Cultural and Crisis," 57.

<sup>169</sup> David Priestland, *The Red Flag* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 433.

<sup>170</sup> Priestland, *Red Flag*, 443.

<sup>171</sup> Alexander Gribanov, "Samizdat According to Andropov," *Poetics Today* 30 no. 1 (2009): 90.

<sup>172</sup> Gribanov, "Samizdat," 90.

this underground literature was a threat, and he supported his argument by warning the party that any such literature was dangerous to the solidarity of the Party and the country. He also concluded that the majority audience of samizdat was the intelligentsia.<sup>173</sup> In April 1971, the Central Committee responded to Andropov, accepting most of his argument to crack down on samizdat, but widening his definition of the term to include any material that was “anti-Soviet” or “politically harmful.” The Committee also agreed that samizdat was present mainly among “members of scientific and artistic professions.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, it became more dangerous for the Strugatskys as they wrote more politicized works, and for their audience to read these works in secret.

It is necessary to examine the backgrounds of the Soviet leaders to understand how the policy changes that affected the Strugatskys and the intelligentsia took place. Gorbachev followed Chernenko after Chernenko’s death in April 1984. Gorbachev reorganized the government during his time in power to such an extent that it ushered in the end of Soviet Union after almost 70 years. Gorbachev was born in 1931 to a poor family and worked on a collective farm in his early life. He graduated from law school at Moscow University in 1955, and thus spent his formative young adult years in Khrushchev’s Thaw. This was a departure from Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, whose worldviews developed under Stalinism.<sup>175</sup> Similarly to Khrushchev, Gorbachev instituted reforms to move away from a stagnated past. Gorbachev instilled a new party line calling for glasnost and perestroika, which meant openness and restructuring, respectively. Glasnost gave more freedoms to the Soviet people to discuss

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<sup>173</sup> Griбанov, “Samizdat,” 91.

<sup>174</sup> Griбанov, “Samizdat,” 92.

<sup>175</sup> Scott Shane, *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1994), 65.

democratic ideas, and Gorbachev hoped to gain the support of the intelligentsia for his reformed government.<sup>176</sup> This liberation was a step towards the hopeful future that the intelligentsia had long envisioned; however, a history of failed promises scarred their hopes.

After 1985, the state released writers imprisoned under Article 70.<sup>177</sup> The Strugatsky Brothers then published certain novels in their country for the first time, which were previously too dangerous to submit to the editor or so heavily edited that they did not embody the original intentions. In the years leading up to glasnost in 1985, the Strugatskys' writings followed the general disillusionment of the intelligentsia and depicted uncertain futures with continued repression. Two novels illustrate this change well: *The Snail on the Slope*, which has a long and complex publication history, and *The Doomed City*, which the authors kept in secret for many years, knowing that it pushed the boundaries of what they could write too far. This chapter organization follows that of the second chapter, giving brief introductions to each novel followed by thematic interpretations of the authors on politics, science and philosophy on happiness and history.

### *The Snail on the Slope*

Considered by the Strugatskys to be their best work, *The Snail on the Slope* had a complicated publication history, as it overtly expressed political ideas contrary to Soviet ideology.<sup>178</sup> The Strugatskys wrote *The Snail* during the mid-to-late 1960s after the removal of Khrushchev from power and through the first years of Brezhnev's time in office. The novel includes two separate stories told in alternating chapters. One story takes place in the wild

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<sup>176</sup> Lovell and Marsh, "Culture and Crisis," 72.

<sup>177</sup> Shane, *Dismantling Utopia*, 65.

<sup>178</sup> Andrew Liptak, "Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's 'Roadside Picnic,'" *Kirkus Reviews*, 2014, accessed August 2, 2017, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/arkady-and-boris-strugatskys-roadside-picnic/>.

Forest, while the other takes place in the organized city. Russian magazines released the less political Forest story in 1968, yet the entire novel also circulated as samizdat so audiences could read the more controversial half.<sup>179</sup> A German publisher first published *The Snail* in full in 1972, along with *The Ugly Swans* in that same year.<sup>180</sup> The Western publications contributed to the backlash the Brothers faced from publishing houses and their unsteady footing with the Soviet government. Due to the history of the novel, *The Snail on the Slope* is often included in discussions regarding the later part of the Strugatskys' career. For the Introduction of a 1980 edition of the novel, Darko Suvin wrote that it marked the beginning of the third phase of their writing evolution. He characterized this phase with increased criticism towards the government and "alienated and somber" language, in contrast to the commitment for change present in earlier works.<sup>181</sup> This tone compliments the themes of *The Doomed City* as well, creating a new attitude in later Strugatsky works.

*The Snail on the Slope* tells two stories, both taking place in the same unspecified region and interconnected, although the characters never meet. The setting is a city run by the Directorate, an authoritarian government, which is parallel to the Forest, an un-developed land in which forest people and creatures live ungoverned by the Directorate. The Directorate goal is "eradication", or destruction of the Forest so the city can expand.<sup>182</sup> The first story is that of Kandid, a man who studies the Forest from the city until the day he falls out of a helicopter into the Forest, and loses his memory. In the story, the Forest people take him in, and he marries a

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<sup>179</sup> Simon, "Political Context," 389. See also: Darko Suvin, "Introduction," in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *The Snail on the Slope*, trans. Alan Meyers (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 2.

<sup>180</sup> Simon, "Political Context," 389.

<sup>181</sup> Darko Suvin, "Introduction," in Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 5.

<sup>182</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 226.



young woman named Nava, who nicknames him “Dummy” because of his lost memory. Throughout Kandid’s adventures, the eradication process causes environmental disasters. The Forest people refer to these events as part of the Accession, akin to the apocalypse.<sup>183</sup> Kandid’s goal is to leave the Forest for the city, and while he fights his way to the edge, he gains the ability to think critically, as he sees flashes of memory of his old life in the repressive city, and he realizes what the Accession is. No longer a dummy, Kandid decides to continue his life in the Forest with Nava, rather than return to government-run society because he would prefer the threat of apocalypse to what the other character, Pepper, is experiencing in the city.

The other half of the novel follows Pepper through his life in the city, which he traveled to for better opportunities than his life in the countryside. Pepper works at his assigned job for the Directorate in an office where he does mathematical equations but is ignorant as to what he is calculating. After living the mundane city life, he wants to leave, as it was not all he dreamed. The Directorate prevents this by reassigning Pepper to study the Forest, and postponing granting Pepper permission to leave the city. To his own surprise, in a matter of days in his new job, Pepper awakens to find himself head of the Directorate, with the power to dictate the future of the city. This plot twist has little explanation, as Pepper simply enters the office of the Director by chance, to find that the office belongs to him. With so much opportunity for change before him, Pepper has no idea what his first move should be. His girlfriend Alevtina informs him that his biggest wishes, for democracy in the city and the end of eradication, would not be easy to achieve due to the entangling bureaucracy that existed for so long. Any unraveling of the current

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<sup>183</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 43.

order could create more problems rather than solve them, leaving a perplexed Pepper unsure of what he can actually accomplish, and the audience is left in suspense as the novel abruptly ends.

### *The Doomed City*

The Strugatskys dedicated more time to writing *The Doomed City* than other works, from its conception in 1967 to its final publication in Russia.<sup>184</sup> The publisher split *The Doomed City* in two halves, the first released in 1988 and the second in 1989, as it stretches over 400 pages, much longer than their other books.<sup>185</sup> It centers on the City: a complex world of The Experiment, a dome-covered place that people from around the world volunteer to live in. As Boris wrote in the Afterword for the 2016 publication of the novel, they never expected to publish this book in their lifetime.<sup>186</sup> They completed the writing process in 1972, and they feared putting the book through the same trials as *The Snail* and *The Ugly Swans*. Only a few close friends knew of the book, having listened to it read aloud by the Brothers. Close friends also held typed copies of the book, in case something were to happen to Boris and Arkady, and these copies stayed hidden until the official publication of the novel. Boris wrote in the Afterword that going through such lengths for publication fit the novel, as the main theme traced the evolution of a man's perspective over time. Originally, the Strugatskys intended it as an autobiography of their personal ideological experience, making it one of the most telling of the Strugatsky works.

The main character is Andrei, a Russian who moved to the City, which encompasses an Experiment run by the mysterious Mentors. The Experiment assigns each participant a personal

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<sup>184</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *The Doomed City*, 457.

<sup>185</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *The Doomed City*, 460.

<sup>186</sup> Strugatsky, "Afterword," in *The Doomed City*, 458.

Mentor for answering questions and granting advice. The reader receives little background on the City, which runs almost like an ordinary municipality. Initially, Andrei holds a job as a garbage collector along with several friends, who are from different countries. Mysteriously, the people also come from different periods in time. Andrei is an astronomer from the 1951 Soviet Union, having been a supporter of Stalinism before Andrei came to participate in the Experiment. His friends have varied views on politics, as they come from a variety of places: Fritz Heiger is a World War II Nazi, another friend is a British colonel from World War I, and one is an American professor and war veteran from 1967.<sup>187</sup> The City assigns the citizens to their jobs, and switches them around every couple of years. This allows the organization of the novel to revolve around Andrei's jobs, while he slowly reaches more prestigious jobs, culminating in his becoming a government official. His Mentor, whom he asks for advice and receives vague answers, sometimes visits Andrei; however, the Mentor's presence grows more distanced throughout.

Quickly, the people of the Experiment begin to feel abandoned. The lightbulb sun goes out for hours and days at a time, leaving the City in darkness. The feelings of abandonment lead to the people taking matters into their own hands, with Fritz organizing a *coup d'état*, after which he installs himself as an authoritarian dictator. Fritz claims that there is an Anti-City across the land, and that these people are planning an invasion. Fritz sends Andrei and their friend Izya out with a military group to travel across lands unseen to defeat the Anti-City. After months of searching near deserted land, the military unit succumbs to infighting and destroys itself, leaving only Andrei and Izya as survivors. They miraculously reach the end of the dome encasing the City, where they meet shadowy figures and black out. When they regain consciousness, they are

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<sup>187</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 6.

in a bedroom they have never seen, and Andrei's Mentor is there talking. Andrei learns that they passed through the first circle of the Experiment, but have many more to experience, as the City is only the beginning. The novel ends here, leaving the readers unsure of Andrei's and the Experiment's final fate.

### Russia's Totalitarian Futures

Both *The Snail on the Slope* and *The Doomed City* contain explicit views on the Soviet government and communism, which prevented publication in full until perestroika. Therefore, both novels show the result of the Strugatskys ideological journey through the decades of the Soviet experiment. The Brothers disillusionment deepened in the face of blacklisting, and communism no longer held the bright future originally hoped and modeled in their earlier works. Instead, there was fear that authoritarianism went hand in hand with Soviet socialism, as each leader before Gorbachev demonstrated. *The Snail* envisioned an embedded bureaucracy resistant to change, while the latter *Doomed City* imagined an endless circle of uncertainty, an explicit metaphor of failed promises of communism. While in Soviet reality, aspects of life such as access to education and jobs may have improved, individual freedoms did not appear to be on the horizon.

### *The Snail on the Slope: Democracy as an Uphill Battle*

In *The Snail on the Slope*, the audience experiences life in a city contrasted sharply against the neighboring Forest. Both characters, Pepper and Kandid, go on journeys looking for answers. The more political aspect of the novel is the story of Pepper, as he transitions from desiring to leave the city, to overseeing its government, the Directorate. Pepper feels like an

outsider in the city, surrounded by those who have accepted its ways.<sup>188</sup> The Directorate system resembles that of the Soviet Union, using tactics like the denunciations or “derailments” against your neighbor, a twisting bureaucracy difficult to maneuver and an ideology that the government fed incessantly to the people. Through Pepper, the reader experiences the frustrations of working with a government that never gives a straight answer, as he strives to find a life that suits him.

Early in the novel, the reader receives their first glimpse of the workings of the Directorate and the isolation of the main characters from the rest of their societies. In the City, the government mandates the people listen to propaganda messages and announcements delivered through telephones simultaneously to all citizens. The caller is the Director himself, the government leader, but when Pepper picks up multiple phones, he hears only static, as opposed to the Director’s lecture that everyone else can hear. This is an early example of Pepper’s alienation from the government, which happens in many ways throughout the novel. Kandid’s storyline mirrors that of Pepper, as Kandid is an outsider in the Forest among a primitive civilization that adopted him after his helicopter crash. Kandid desires to discover what lays beyond the edge of the woods, yet the other townspeople are content at home. Ironically, Pepper wishes to be free in the Forest while Kandid is curious about the city life. As the novel progresses, the parallel storylines grow increasingly inverse.

In the conclusion of Pepper’s story, an officer of the Directorate approaches Pepper and asks cryptic questions about significant decisions that Pepper needs to make. This causes Pepper in his unease and confusion to turn and run from the man, straight through the office door of the Director. However, the room is empty, looking as it did when Pepper first spoke to the Director

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<sup>188</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 30.

about changing his job, to no avail. Here Pepper learns that he has somehow become Director, even though he is extremely inexperienced. Thoughts race through his mind, as Pepper worries that the Directorate bureaucracy exists just to keep people busy and unthinking, so they pass their time in contentment.<sup>189</sup> Perhaps Pepper had become a potential threat to the status quo with his free-thinking mind, and so as a distraction, the government selected him as Director.

In his new role as Director, Pepper immediately desires to take action against the destruction of the Forest. His girlfriend Alevtina enters the office, and informs Pepper that every director must continue the work of those before him, because the long-established status quo must be maintained. Alevtina distracts Pepper from making the major changes he wants, as she explains to him that is difficult to upturn an entire system. Alevtina also assures Pepper that no order he issues is permanent, for he can always change his mind and issue a new one. In writing this, the Strugatskys comment on Soviet policies that changed with every new leader, such as Khrushchev's liberalism on publication followed by Brezhnev's strict conservatism. Pepper's new position is a very striking ending to *The Snail on the Slope*, as the Strugatskys leave the audience in suspense as to if Pepper can bring democracy to the city or not.

Darko Suvin wrote the Introduction to the 1980 English translation of *The Snail on the Slope*, and he identified Pepper and Kandid as representative of the intelligentsia having to choose between "accommodation and refusal" to higher authority.<sup>190</sup> In *The Snail*, this authority is the Directorate and symbolizes the Soviet Union government and Communist Party. This aligns with the concept of the "lost" intelligentsia as trying to occupy a space in-between, a

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<sup>189</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 224.

<sup>190</sup> Suvin, "Introduction," in Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 13.

balancing act between both extremes. Ironically, Pepper is initially resistant to the Directorate and looking for a simple life, until he becomes Director and suddenly full of ideas on policy changes. Meanwhile, Kandid looks for a new exciting adventure, only to accept the simple life of the Forest. The Strugatskys display opposing intelligentsia mindsets in the novel, a realistic interpretation of their audience's opinions. On one hand, there is a desire to change the government, but no clear way how to do so, and on the other there is some contentment within one's own mind and leading a quiet life.

### *The Doomed City: Return to Authoritarianism*

In the Foreword to the 2016 edition of *The Doomed City*, Dmitry Glukhovsky, Russian journalist and author, wrote about the reality of St. Petersburg, the inspiration for the fictional City, and the importance of the Strugatskys influence. He described Soviet society as waiting in line today in the hopes that tomorrow would be better with the attainment of communism. If they could wait five years to get a car, they would wait twenty years for communism, as Khrushchev promised.<sup>191</sup> In the opening of the novel, as garbage collectors, Andrei and his friends are even waiting in a line of dump trucks to drop off their load of trash.<sup>192</sup> As the Soviet people waited, they read science fiction to see what they might be waiting for. Science fiction was mainstream entertainment, and had more freedom than other forms of expression because it could always claim to be about another place and time.<sup>193</sup> However, in *The Doomed City*, the fictional world resembles reality more than other Strugatsky works because they knew they would not try to publish it, as the censors would see the anti-Soviet meaning even if they tried to obscure it.

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<sup>191</sup> Dmitry Glukhovsky, "Foreword," in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016), Kindle, viii.

<sup>192</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 17, 125.

<sup>193</sup> Glukhovsky, "Foreword," in *The Doomed City*, ix.

Glukhovsky took many visits to St. Petersburg before writing the Foreword to the novel, to better understand the Strugatskys' point of view, and his experience altered his perspective on the book. Citizens of St. Petersburg refer to it as just "the City", officially named Leningrad during the Soviet era.<sup>194</sup> This is also how the characters in the book refer to where the Experiment takes place. During the imperial era, St. Petersburg served as the "window to the West," and later the "cradle of the revolution" where the communist experiment began, and it survived lengthy siege during World War II.<sup>195</sup> It was home to the Strugatskys, and thus the perfect model for their most critical work on the government of their nation. Glukhovsky concludes his introduction by explaining that readers of the Strugatskys' works looked to the authors for their opinions, hoping for prophecies about what was to come. Glukhovsky wrote: "And weren't they the first who dared to state on paper that the City was doomed?"<sup>196</sup>

It is during Andrei's job as a newspaper editor that things start to change, as Andrei's friend Fritz, the Nazi, leads a *coup d'état* against the mysterious and distant Experiment leaders. People like Fritz and Andrei came to the City of their own accord, for a variety of reasons. For instance, a young disillusioned American arrives from 1963 after the death of John F. Kennedy, while Andrei's girlfriend, Selma, arrives from Sweden to escape life as a prostitute.<sup>197</sup> This creates a cosmopolitan City, a trait also shared with Soviet St. Petersburg. Other than the Mentors, the government is absent, and so Fritz easily rallies the people against them. Fritz's *coup d'état* does not rid the people of the Mentors yet their presence becomes scarcer after this event.

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<sup>194</sup> Glukhovsky, "Foreword," in *The Doomed City*, xii

<sup>195</sup> Glukhovsky, "Foreword," in *The Doomed City*, xii.

<sup>196</sup> Glukhovsky, "Foreword," in *The Doomed City*, xii.

<sup>197</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 271, 58.



Andrei's increasing independence may be a cause of the lack of his Mentor, and his philosophical journey from staunch supporter of Stalinism to a disbeliever speaks to the larger disillusionment of the intelligentsia. When first meeting Selma, she surprises Andrei when he learns she was a prostitute. Andrei is unable to withhold his outburst that she could have joined the Party and had a strong career, as there were opportunities for women to work, or she could have married to become a mother.<sup>198</sup> Andrei believes initially that the Experiment is working towards the ideology of Stalinism: "There's only one cause on Earth worth working for – building communism! That *is* Stalin's cause."<sup>199</sup> Andrei also embodies Stalin's dislike of the "toiling intelligentsia" as they were known, believing them to serve whoever holds power.<sup>200</sup> Midway through the novel, Andrei actually meets Stalin, although the character is not named, only referred to as the "Great Strategist."<sup>201</sup> They meet in what appears to be a hallucination of Andrei's while he works as a detective investigating a mysterious building that disappears and reappears in various places. Andrei and Stalin play chess, but the pieces are small humans, some of which are friends of the players. When a player defeats a piece, it must die, and Stalin is unaffected by killing off his own men. Andrei realizes that before he came to the Experiment, he was following Stalin blindly, and that Andrei was nothing to Stalin but a game piece, a soldier to die in the name of Stalin's communist goal.<sup>202</sup> This encounter shakes Andrei's conviction of Stalinism, leaving him no longer a dedicated communist.

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<sup>198</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 58.

<sup>199</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 80.

<sup>200</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 81.

<sup>201</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 140.

<sup>202</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 144.

The intelligentsia experience in the USSR from the 1960s onward comes through in both *The Snail on the Slope* and *The Doomed City*, depicting characters who search for answers and find them, only to be disappointed. The authors negative interpretation of authoritarian government contrasts their other novels, the governmental authority being a powerful counter to characters like Pepper and Andrei who seek only a simple happy life. Government is also a looming threat to Kandid, who finally finds serenity in the Forest, but the Forest is facing destruction. While Andrei's tale is one of slowly losing belief in the hope of communism, Pepper hopes for democracy, until given the chance to actually make a change he finds himself unable to do so. These core character traits mark the change in the Strugatskys' writing that scholars have identified: increasing pessimism and disillusionment with the Soviet experiment.

#### The Strugatskys on Science in the Age of Machines

On April 12, 1985, Cosmonauts' Day, a Soviet official holiday and the 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's successful space trip, Doctor Vladimir Brodsky led protesters in Gagarin Square against nuclear weapons, a movement quickly put to rest by the police<sup>203</sup> Scientists worried about the environmental effects of a nuclear war, believing it would create so much debris as to block sunlight and lead to global cooling, a "nuclear winter."<sup>204</sup> Nuclear destruction was a common fear around the world, thus the increased criticism of nuclear weapons and the start of a peace movement which took root both in the West and the East. The protest in Russia took place on Cosmonauts' Day, the holiday representing a great Soviet achievement in the Space Race. Rather than honoring this day again, a part of the population stood against nuclear

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<sup>203</sup> Paul Rubinson, "The Global Effects of Nuclear Winter: Science and Antinuclear Protest in the United States and the Soviet Union During the 1980s," *Cold War History* 14, no. 1 (2014): 49.

<sup>204</sup> Rubinson, "Global Effects," 51.

weapons. Science was in some ways moving on from the initial excitement of space, to put worries of nuclear destruction behind, and the Strugatskys' *The Snail on the Slope* reflected this shift. They focused instead on machines and artificial intelligence, a topic that is still popular in science fiction today.

In *The Snail on the Slope*, Pepper encounters a strange event in the city, when a machine created in an engineering lab escapes.<sup>205</sup> In a chaotic scene, an announcement informs all the citizens about the escape, and the Directorate enacts “regulation number six hundred and seventy-five point Pegasus.”<sup>206</sup> This regulation requires everyone to search for the machine, because after six hours it explodes by remote control. The scene is chaotic because the Directorate does not allow people other than engineers to see the machines, as they are top-secret experiments. If a person glimpses the technology, the Directorate relocates them to work with the engineers or in the Forest, difficult and demanding positions. As Pepper makes his way around town with his hand over his eyes, not really looking for the machine, he reflects on his unhappy feelings towards the Directorate: tired of having to always show papers, complying to the jobs assigned and overall alienation from one's own self. Sinking deep into disillusionment, Pepper reflects that the people are foolish, as they think they can change anything. He says:

You can, of course, announce a campaign to abolish winter,  
do a bit of shamanism after eating mushrooms full of drugs,

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<sup>205</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 192.

<sup>206</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 192.

beat drums, screech curses, but all the same, it's better to sew yourself  
a fur coat and buy warm boots.<sup>207</sup>

The “winter” could incur in the minds of the audience both resistance to the nuclear winter and a ridiculous goal for the government, while also encouraging readers to look out for themselves.

Pepper then stumbles across a container which holds machines, and overhears them in conversation. Pepper cannot see the machines, but determines that they are toys, including a large doll and Winnie the Pooh.<sup>208</sup> The machines have a reasoned discussion of whether machines or humans are the dominant partner in the relationship between man and science. The machines believe that they are superior and the humans simply get in their way, implying that eventually robots should eliminate humans. Here, the American reader may recall the 1968 film, directed by Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where the spaceship computer HAL is the villain.<sup>209</sup> HAL and the machines of the Directorate's experiments are products of human's increasing technology development. As supporters of science, the Strugatskys naturally hope for technology that will improve life in the future, yet they expressed concern in this novel for this technology surpassing even human control. The tone of this discussion in *The Snail on the Slope* is darker than the comedic chaos of *Monday Starts on Saturday*, where the authors poke fun at the science industry. As technology advances, there is fear even today of it reducing jobs and of computers developing artificial intelligence.

As devoted fans of science, Arkady and Boris imagined the future of the field; however, in the latter stages of their joint career, politics was a bigger concern for the Brothers, as the

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<sup>207</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 201.

<sup>208</sup> Strugatsky, *The Snail*, 202.

<sup>209</sup> Stanley Kubrick, dir. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968; Beverly Hills: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1997), DVD.

government prevented them from expressing the future they feared. *The Snail on the Slope* tackled new concerns for technology, mainly artificial intelligence, and therefore was still hopeful for the development of science within the Soviet Union. In contrast, in *The Doomed City*, politics has almost completely consumed the Strugatskys' focus, leaving little to discuss on the topic of science. The political state of the Soviet Union preoccupied the Strugatskys while they composed this semi-autobiographical work, yet their signature philosophies on life do still come into the picture.

#### Disavowing Communist Ideology in the Continued Quest for Happiness

As in their other novels, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky took author liberties to discuss the meaning of life. Their later novels included their changed opinion on the Soviet government, reflecting on Marxism and the ability of communism to create a happy society. The very title of *The Snail on the Slope* indicates the struggle of the Soviet intelligentsia in an upward battle towards improved society. *The Doomed City*, written for the desk drawer, also embodies this change of opinion that the slope is quite steep, and the government is moving slowly towards its goals, if it is moving forward at all. If also intended to be autobiographical, the reflections and loss of faith of Andrei probably reflect similar feelings in Boris and Arkady. Inferring the same for *The Snail*, that the Brothers injected their personal opinion into the work, then the characters strive for what the Strugatskys want: democracy and free thought.

In *The Snail on the Slope*, Arkady and Boris return to questioning Marxist communism, in a way similar to *Hard to Be a God*, using the story of Kandid and the Forest. Kandid is on a quest for self-discovery while around him the government destroys the Forest; the very government he hopes will offer answers for his lost memory. The novel uses this environmental

destruction to question whether all progress is good, but also the simplicity of the Forest life which Kandid comes to prefer to the busy city. For example, the Accession of the Forest means expansion for the city at the cost of the Forest people's homes and lives. Also, Kandid discovers that more knowledge about his life in the city will not make him happier; what does satisfy him is knowing that he has the freedom to think for himself, even though he lives in a primitive society.<sup>210</sup> The Strugatskys wrote *Hard to Be a God* a few years earlier than *The Snail*, therefore they both embody the Strugatskys' questioning thoughts on progress. So, while the Soviet government promised progress yet this did not include creative freedoms nor the end of the Cold War, the Strugatskys and intelligentsia as a whole lost faith in progress as Marx imagined it, and the government pictured it.

In *The Doomed City*, Andrei and his friend Izya stumble upon the legendary "City of a Thousand Statues" and enter a Pantheon-like building where large living statues have convened for a meeting. While Izya preaches to the statues about logic and history, Andrei lets loose a rant about the individualism missing from his life. He speaks to the silent, yet alive, statues about how man strives for "greatness", the source of which is creativity.<sup>211</sup> If success derives from creativity, then the ability of a writer to express himself in his art is crucial for one to live the life one wants. Andrei's lengthy tangent proceeds to discuss religion, banned in the Soviet Union, and he questions whether God really is good, as God intends to organize the chaos of a new universe while the Devil tries to inflict disorder. Man also seeks disorder because man's desire is to follow his own rules. On the other hand, dictators seek to control the chaos, as God did, so

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<sup>210</sup> Simon, "Political Context," 387.

<sup>211</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 406.

perhaps good and evil are not what they seem, because dictators are not often benevolent gods.<sup>212</sup> These thoughts of Andrei evoke a sense that what propaganda taught the Strugatskys as part of the early Soviet generation was not true, to which conclusion they eventually came. They question again the role of authoritarian government and progress, challenging what the Soviet government expected them to believe.

All the characters in *The Doomed City* and *The Snail* are searching for happiness and more meaning in life, yet their stories end in ambiguity, as many Strugatsky novels, leaving the audience to wonder what might come next. One final interesting note is another tangent of Andrei's while talking to the living statues. He berates them for being memorials to historical figures, as no one remembers who the figures were. Using Peter the Great as an example, he shouts that no one remembers Peter's last name, even though he was a "great" czar and significant figure.<sup>213</sup> The Soviet government built numerous monuments and was known for building imposing architecture to impress a feeling of greatness and importance of the nation, but Andrei was not impressed, only frustrated in the face of imposed greatness. Through Andrei, Pepper and Kandid, the Strugatskys expressed skepticism of the past, present and future. Happiness was a very distant horizon now.

### Conclusion

For the intelligentsia, the late 1970s through the 1980s fostered further disillusionment, and the Strugatsky Brothers supported this experience via their works. Both *The Snail on the Slope* and *The Doomed City* embody this increased pessimistic tone. Yet the Brothers remained

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<sup>212</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 406-407.

<sup>213</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 408.

popular, their works read in secret in Russia and openly in the West. Their audience could empathize with characters who dreamed of a utopian future but saw darkness ahead. The Strugatskys' predominant themes continued from their earlier novels, including the fear of authoritarian governments, the role of technology and science, and the search for happiness and truth. While the authors and their peers struggled with the uncertain direction of Russia, they sought community, validation, voice and some sense of escape.

Ivan Yefremov, the Strugatskys progenitor who wrote the pro-communist *Andromeda*, also lost faith in his government, as depicted in his second novel, *The Hour of the Bull* (1970).<sup>214</sup> Less extreme than *The Doomed City*, this sequel features a planet which people from Earth have colonized as a totalitarian system. Publishing houses feared to support this new work, and there was even a rumor that a spy from the West was impersonating Yefremov.<sup>215</sup> As a member of the intelligentsia, Yefremov is another example of the pessimism that penetrated intellectuals. *The Hour of the Bull* is a strong contrast to the 1957 *Andromeda*, demonstrating that in a little over a decade Yefremov began to lose faith in his government as well.

Boris Strugatsky passed away on November 19, 2012, before which he wrote afterwords to the select new editions of their still-popular science fiction. Until his death, Boris continued to fight against the authoritarian tendencies in Russia, which he feared were returning under president Vladimir Putin. Boris joined other intelligentsia in their critique of Putin's ways of governing, seeing too many similarities to Soviet times.<sup>216</sup> Boris was quoted saying some of his concerns for present Russia: "The nationalization is continuing everywhere. The press is

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<sup>214</sup> Ivan Yefremov, *The Hour of the Bull* (Russia: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1970).

<sup>215</sup> Simon, "Political Context," 400.

<sup>216</sup> Miriam Elder, "Boris Strugatsky: Russian mourns death of sci-fi writer – even Vladimir Putin," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/nov/20/boris-strugatsky-russia-sci-fi-writer>.



completely under the control of the authorities. The bureaucratic power is always getting stronger.”<sup>217</sup> Putin however, praised Boris’ talent upon his death, probably because ignoring the Strugatskys’ legacy would be politically damaging.<sup>218</sup>

The Strugatskys have received increased attention in recent years, especially due to the re-release of many of the films based on their novels, but also due to the rise of Putin and repression.<sup>219</sup> Here, American readers are reminded of how Donald Trump’s presidency spurred a rise in sales of George Orwell’s dystopian novel, *1984*. The concerns are similar: the fear of dictatorship, of government lies and coverups, and of control of the press. In *The Doomed City*, when Andrei worked as a newspaper publisher, he frantically burned all his paper copies when Fritz came to power, destroying anything that criticized what Fritz stood for.<sup>220</sup> That same type of control Boris predicted at the time he wrote the novel. The Strugatskys remain popular today as the current generation struggles under a leader who threatens the freedoms of expression that were so crucial to the Strugatskys own values.

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<sup>217</sup> Elder, “Boris Strugatsky.”

<sup>218</sup> Elder, “Boris Strugatsky.”

<sup>219</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Orwell’s “1984” and Trump’s America,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2017.

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/orwells-1984-and-trumps-america>. See also: Orwell, *1984*.

<sup>220</sup> Strugatsky, *The Doomed City*, 240.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars use the science fiction literature of Boris and Arkady Strugatsky to learn about the Soviet experience of the intelligentsia, the primary audience of the novels. While there were intellectuals who conformed to the Party ideas and intellectuals who joined the dissident movement, the Strugatskys never wrote to either such extreme in their joint career. Rather, the legacy of the authors supports the existence of the “lost” intelligentsia, one opinion of a multifaceted group. The Brothers initially strove to offer ideas on how to improve Soviet society in the communist setting; yet, as their career progressed in the late 1970s during the second half of the Brezhnev period, they grew more negative, but never really reached a level of dissidence.

The Strugatskys’ career coincided with the political shifts that took place when leaders of the Soviet Union changed. When Khrushchev came to power in 1953, he ushered in a new era which the intelligentsia skeptically took advantage of to publish works that pushed the envelope. The Strugatskys published *Hard to Be a God* and *Monday Starts on Saturday* during this time, and both novels expressed hope that the Thaw would help the country move on from Stalin towards the communist utopia. During the early Brezhnev period, the Brothers composed *The Ugly Swans* and *Roadside Picnic*, which differed greatly from the previous novels in terms of plot, as the authors’ hope began to falter in the face of stricter censorship. In the late 1970s onward, the Brothers published *The Snail on the Slope* and *The Doomed City*, the latter only after the fall of the Soviet Union. These works represent the final stage in the Strugatskys writing evolution, offering little hope to readers that the Soviet government could be anything but an authoritarian regime.

This thesis addressed key research questions regarding the shift in the Strugatskys' writings over time, examining the main themes of government authority, science, and happiness. In *Hard to Be a God*, the Strugatskys initially depicted a fascist government as an example for the Soviet government of what not to do, implying that the future was still open to communist utopia. In the next two decades, the Strugatskys instead portrayed the communist experiment as a never-ending cycle of authoritarianism, as in *The Doomed City*. In regard to scientific development, the Space Race initially fueled excitement for the potential of science, but as this excitement subsided, there was fear in the power of science that it might surpass human intelligence. The 1964 *Monday Starts on Saturday* is a satire of a Soviet scientific institution, poking fun at the chaos of research and the long work week of Soviet scientists. The additional Strugatsky novels discussed here then look at the changing goals of science, from exploring human evolution and aliens, to the potential of artificial intelligence in machines.

The final theme discussed in this thesis addressed the philosophical concept of happiness in Strugatsky works. While Anton in *Hard to Be a God* struggled with his power to stop the installation of a fascist government, in *The Ugly Swans*, Victor Banev watched his daughter become part of a new evolution of man, a type of man who wanted to cleanse the world of certain types of people. In *Roadside Picnic*, Red wishes for happiness for everyone, as does Pepper in *The Snail on the Slope*, although Pepper's happiness is democracy. Finally, in *The Doomed City*, Andrei slowly loses his belief in the communist utopia and all but gives up on his life. This thesis brought together the three main themes of the Brothers' writings, to support the "lost" perspective of the intelligentsia and the Strugatskys' own growing pessimism.

Boris and Arkady Strugatsky cemented their place in Soviet history with their lengthy and productive careers as authors by providing a voice to the lost. Not only through their open endings, mysterious plots and relatable characters, but through their political and scientific opinions did they contribute to Soviet society and work to shape a better future for themselves and their country. They began their work by accident, as Arkady recounted in an interview in 1988:

Our professional work in SF began with a bet.

In 1958, when we made sarcastic remarks about some very feeble SF book, we were challenged: it's easy to criticize, they said, but just try writing one yourself.<sup>221</sup>

The Strugatskys wrote many more than just one novel, and more than what is generally covered in scholarly research today, leaving behind a wealth of sources to examine how they experienced life in the Soviet Union, and how they imagined the communist experiment would look.

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<sup>221</sup> Strugatsky and Gopman, "Science Fiction Teaches," 1.

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