

# In Search of Carnavalesque Anomie: The Disavowal of the Liberation in Andreï Makine's *The Crime of Olga Arbyelina*

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Focusing on *The Crime of Olga Arbyelina* (1998), Andreï Makine's fifth and arguably most complex novel, the article investigates the eponymous protagonist's intriguing scepticism about the Liberation. It does so by placing Olga's story in an intratextual context of Makine's other works of fiction whose protagonists are similarly reluctant to welcome peace at the end of World War II and are equally at odds with post-war society. However, unlike the ex-soldiers populating the Franco-Russian novelist's oeuvre, Olga has no direct experience of the front. Her position can therefore be elucidated as motivated by, amongst others, her fear for her position as a Russian exile in France, her concern about a potential resurgence of violence, and her anxiety about her own and her child's mortality. The heroine's attitude may also be explained as driven by her longing for a wartime anomie which takes her back to the revolutionary Russia where she grew up and which she tries to restage by engaging in an incestuous relationship with her own son. Finally, Olga's stance may be seen as reflective of the author's own reverential attitude towards World War II and his correlated nostalgia for the Soviet Union of his youth where the war was indeed celebrated as the defining episode in the Soviet (and European) history, a moment of national and transnational unity, and an event legitimizing the first communist state in the world.

**KEYWORDS** Andreï Makine, Liberation, Soviet Union, World War II, the Great Fatherland War, anomie, carnival, incest

## Introduction

World War II is unquestionably the historical period most frequently revisited in Andreï Makine's oeuvre which re-examines Europe's struggle against Nazism with

the apparent aim of contesting dominant historiography. In this sense, the Franco-Russian author's prose potentially inscribes itself into the recent trend in French literature, exemplified by Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2010), Yanick Haenel's *Jan Karski* (2009), or Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* (1999). Abiding by the principles of postmodern aesthetics, including discontinuity and intertextuality, these historiographic metafictional works, as Linda Hutcheon terms contemporary novels that are 'intensely self-reflexive' yet 'lay claim to historical events and personages' (1988: 5), show the past to have an unavoidably narrative, subjective, and equivocal character. Indeed, like these works, Makine's novels foreground the impossibility of empirically knowing history and stress the continuing relevance of the past for the present. More specifically, they set out to undermine the leading perspectives on World War II and offer insights into hitherto little known episodes of the worldwide fight against fascism (cf. Attack & Lloyd, 2012).

This approach is embodied by several of Makine's Soviet protagonists whose frontline memories clash with the myth of the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in Russia;<sup>1</sup> established by Stalin and maintained by his followers, the myth emphasized the generalissimo's and the Party's leading role in the Great Victory, and lauded the Red Army's heroics, downplaying in the process the Soviet people's suffering and loss (Tumarkin, 1994). Intriguingly, these protagonists' position is shared by the eponymous heroine of *The Crime of Olga Arbyelina* (hereafter *The Crime*), a Russian princess living in French exile since the Civil War of 1921–22, and now facing Liberation from Nazi occupation. Like Makine's ex-soldiers and frontline nurses, who forever dwell on their wartime memories, fail to reconcile their experience with the propagandist version of the war, and struggle to readjust to peacetime existence, Olga refuses to rejoice in the Liberation and opposes the universal desire to draw a line under the Occupation, which – she believes – would only reduce *les années noires* to clichés. The princess's attitude is surprising not only because of her lack of frontline experience, but also her homeland's staggering wartime losses and, on a personal level, the tragic fate of her friend, Li, imprisoned and tortured by the Germans. As for Arbyelina herself, the food shortages and the mutual hostility and self-interest brought on by the Occupation had further endangered the life of her haemophiliac son: 'everything that could protect her child had disappeared. Medicines, food, the increasingly grudging sympathy of other people ...' (Makine, 1999a: 89).

To elucidate Olga's curious stance, I will first examine early signs of the heroine's resentment and speculate about its possible motives. I then re-position Arbyelina's story in the broader context of the association of war and anomie, positing the heroine's refusal to welcome the Liberation that promises to restore constraining prewar moral and social norms, as narcissistically grounded. Having established a parallel between the Russian Civil War that evidently shaped the princess's sensibility, and World War II that recreates the transgressive atmosphere of her youth, I will conclude by discussing how Olga's position serves as a reflection of the writer's own

<sup>1</sup>Notably, Ivan Demidov (Makine, 2003), Pavel (Makine, 2001), or Volsky (Makine, 2010).

nostalgia and his corresponding reverential attitude towards that later conflict. I close my analysis by returning to the correlation between Makine's fifth novel and contemporary French treatments of the war that, following Hutcheon's view of postmodern art as 'inescapably political', can be seen as a challenge to the dominant ideologies of the West and, more specifically, to the public image of World War II (1988: 4).

### Off with their heads!

The plot of *The Crime*, much of which is occupied by analeptic snapshots narrating Olga's Russian past, unfolds between the summers of 1946 and 1947 as France gradually transitions from war to peace. Having met Olga straight after the boating accident that cost the life of her unwelcome suitor, Sergei Golets, we are transported back to the previous summer when an unexpected pregnancy makes the heroine suspect her son of drugging and raping her. The action then develops chronologically, retracing the princess's life in Villiers-la-Forêt, a small town near Paris, where, having been abandoned by her *bon vivant* husband, Olga runs a Russian library. The heroine's routine-driven and solitary existence is punctuated by occasional visits to the capital and sporadic trysts with L.M., a married Russian poet and journalist. It is this isolation that fosters the forbidden love between mother and son, a love that Olga abhors before accepting it as the utmost expression of maternal devotion. Yet, just as she stops taking sleeping pills in order to enjoy her son's nocturnal visits, the adolescent forsakes his mother's bedroom for outdoor activities and the company of his peers, including – to Olga's horror – teenage girls. *The Crime* ends with the heroine going mad as a result of lack of sleep and mental pressure she endured for months. As Olga is confined to a mental asylum, Li, Olga's ex-husband, and Olga's son return to Russia where, predictably, they suffer Stalin's draconian measures against repatriates.

Olga's resentfulness towards the re-establishment of peace is evident from the abortion scene which, coinciding with the second anniversary of the Liberation, juxtaposes two contrasting realms: the French capital's sun-drenched and music-filled streets and Li's gloomy and cramped flat filled with Russian curios and dominated by a makeshift operating table which Makine, significantly, compares to an ice floe. That the scene is meant to convey the two Russian women's moral superiority over the joyous Parisians can be inferred from Olga's derisive comments; reading it as a sign of her hosts' ability 'to be without a past, without thoughts, without weight; to be merry, intoxicated with being alive, here and now', she scorns the 'easy, spine-tingling, very French happiness' (Makine, 1999a: 38). One could speculate that, by wallowing in sorrow and staying riveted on the past, Li and Olga aim to recreate the wartime atmosphere. Indeed, the scene is dominated by the semantic field of pain, death, and fear as Li's apprehension about performing an illegal termination matches the physical suffering and psychological anguish endured by Olga who speaks of 'this tiny death in my womb', 'the little life destroyed in my womb'

(Makine, 1999a: 38), ‘the tiny lethal operation in [my] body’ (Makine, 1999a: 41), and ‘a little murder’ (Makine, 1999a: 42). Moreover, the tightly drawn curtains in Li’s flat evoke both wartime blackouts and the clandestine nature of the Resistance. Finally, if the scars on Li’s hands and her nightmares do not let Olga forget her friend’s wartime ordeal, by exclaiming ‘The French will guillotine us!’ the two women identify with midwives executed under Vichy for performing clandestine abortions (Makine, 1999a: 38). The spectre of the guillotine is also present in this scene through an earlier reference to Pavel Gorgulov, a Russian exile executed in 1932 for assassinating Paul Doumer. Interestingly, before murdering the French president, Gorgulov had been expelled from Czechoslovakia for carrying out illegal abortions and then was menaced by expulsion from France for practising medicine without authorization (Coeuré & Monier, 2000: 38).

Suggested by the image of aggressive August sunshine vainly battering the firmly closed shutters in Li’s flat, the two women’s anxiety about the return of peace becomes less puzzling when framed by the history of Franco-Russian hostilities related by the novel. Triggered by the October Revolution and amplified by France’s 1924 recognition of the Soviet regime, the tension between the two nations reached its apogee with Doumer’s assassination and Gorgulov’s controversial execution, carried out despite the convict’s alleged insanity. Franco-Russian relations improved only during the war when the Soviets eventually became France’s allies, ‘somewhat rehabilitat[ing] them in the eyes of the French’ (Makine, 1999a: 23). In *The Crime* this rapprochement is incarnated by the French chemist who, after the Western Allies accidentally bombed his pharmacy, grows close to the Russian exiles. While scoring a political goal by implying the superiority of the Red Army’s conduct over that of Royal Air Force (RAF), with his analysis of the fraught relations between the exiles and their hosts Makine tacitly justifies Olga’s ambivalence towards the Liberation. For, once the Soviet heroics and sacrifices are forgotten, the French may resume their hostility towards the Russian diaspora. Such a hypothesis is confirmed by Gorgulov’s synecdochal role for Olga’s community: if both Li and Golets, a Russian doctor anxious about practising medicine illegally, are guilty of the wrongdoings committed by Doumer’s assassin, Olga’s husband and several other men of the Russian community are, like Gorgulov, ex-White Army officers. Additionally, Olga’s son, born in 1932, comes into the world under the sign of ‘the crashing blade and the spurting blood’ (Makine, 1999a: 126), as if Gorgulov’s crime and punishment put a curse on the diaspora’s new generation. Finally, the princess herself narrowly escapes the fate of the deranged Russian exile when, having lost her senses, she acknowledges responsibility for Golets’ accidental drowning.

### **Romano Mussolini is a fine guitar player**

Implicit in the aforementioned scene, Olga’s negative stance towards the Liberation becomes apparent from her response to the news indicating the return of normalcy.

Significantly, the passages describing the heroine's reaction replicate the structure of the abortion scene, which they do by contrasting information about the war with news suggesting that life is resuming its course, and the heroine's desire to remember as opposed to her hosts' urge to forget. Olga is thus perturbed by the juxtaposition of the announcement of the acceleration of trains on the Paris–Marseille line or of the theft of the jewels of the Duchess of Windsor, and a report on Josephine Baker's Resistance activities. Similarly inappropriate she finds the typographical proximity of Ribbentrop's effusions concerning Hitler and a Parisian woman's complaint about *café* awnings hiding the plaques indicating street names. On another occasion the memory of the war and the desire to forget it converge in a single news item, as illustrated by the photograph captioned 'Romano Mussolini is a fine guitar player. The Duce's son is a young man who has forgotten all about the past and would like the whole world to do the same ...' (Makine, 1999a: 88).

In a Russian cultural context, the prewar concerns and activities which, in Olga's view, return too quickly, can be seen as manifestations of *poshlost'*, a concept that captures 'banality, lack of spirituality, and sexual obscenity'. In Russia, as Svetlana Boym explains, 'a preoccupation with everyday life for its own sake was considered unpatriotic, subversive, un-Russian, or even anti-Soviet', a feeling underpinned with the 'fear of banality and "lack of culture", of anything that smacks of middlebrow or middle-class values' (Boym, 1994: 2). Indeed, Olga's stance is shared by not only Li but also L.M. who, having been given 'a guided tour of hell' in former German concentration camps, accuses the French of 'living [their] little operetta of a life' (Makine, 1999a: 68).

## Hanged by the neck until dead

For Olga, the general desire to forget the war is also evidenced by the Nuremberg trials, which is one reason why she condemns them. Another reason may be the heroine's disapproval of capital punishment, which can be inferred from her judgement of the rope used in the hangings as 'out of proportion' (Makine, 1999a: 83). More specifically, Olga's preoccupation with the two columns of figures indicating each execution's start and end communicates her criticism of the standard drop method used at Nuremberg; the gap of between fourteen and twenty-eight minutes means that death occurred by strangulation rather than broken neck, which would have provoked an immediate loss of consciousness. As is the case with other novels by Makine which carry themes of forgiveness and memory that must be preserved so that the dead may be honoured and violence is not repeated, and which portray Russians as intrinsically non-violent and peace-loving,<sup>2</sup> Olga's ambivalence in *The Crime* vis-à-vis Nuremberg and the narrator's implicit criticism of Gorgulov's execution additionally make a point about Russia's progressive stance on capital punishment in relation to the West. For, although both tsars and Communists

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Makine (2000) and Makine (2010).

executed people extensively to wield power,<sup>3</sup> in Russia the death penalty was traditionally seen as incompatible with Christianity and Communism alike. To stress this, in *A Woman Loved* Makine praises the Empress Elisabeth's unprecedented moratorium on death penalty, confirmed by Catherine the Great's ban on capital punishment.

According to Ali Chibani, the hangings of the Nazi generals invoke for Olga the Bolsheviks' violence that particularly touched her social class, Nuremberg exemplifying the *lex talionis* whereby 'the victims re-enact the wrongs of the past in relation to their tormentors' (Chibani, 2009: 173).<sup>4</sup> Consistent with the frequent comparison of the trials to the Germans' treatment of the Jews, voiced by, *inter alia*, the prosecutor for the United States at Nuremberg,<sup>5</sup> Chibani's comment about the self-perpetuation of evil is supported by the news of unrest in the French colony of Algeria or of the development of a plutonium bomb, of which Olga also learns from the press. Consequently, the critic interprets the heroine's abortion as an effort to break the cycle of violence suggested metaphorically by her relationship with her own son (Chibani, 2009: 172), a reading that could be supported through the Girardian conception of incest as a relationship that, like parricide, abolishes the difference protecting society from reciprocal violence (Girard, 2013: 79). If this is even truer in Olga's case where, at least initially, the adolescent possesses his mother against her will, a male offspring of this union would suffer from haemophilia that, impairing the body's ability to control blood clotting, may symbolize further bloodshed brought on by wars. The message of Makine's novel, as read by Chibani, who states that 'what is stamped with the seal of forgetting is inevitably – willingly or not – reproduced' (Chibani, 2007), is that, rather than avenging past wrongs, we should commit them to memory. Incarnating this idea, Olga preserves contemporary history from oblivion both in her professional capacity as a librarian and archivist, and privately, by devoting all her thoughts to the past. Her commitment to the memory of the war is therefore yet another reason for her disapproval of Nuremberg which, like the celebrations of the Liberation, expresses the world's wish to put the war behind it.

The connection Olga establishes between the hangings and the desire to draw a line under the past is confirmed by her unorthodox reading of the photographs of the dead Nazi criminals, the rope used in the hangings, and the phial of poison ingested by Goering, all published alongside the report as an indisputable 'evidence of [the convicts'] death' (Makine, 1999a: 83). Given photography's problematic status in Makine's oeuvre, where pictures simultaneously prove and undermine the represented reality, or create a *trompe l'oeil* effect, these images only intensify the self-contradictory character of Barthes's conception of a photograph as both a token of death and an

<sup>3</sup>Under Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution, and then again under the Bolsheviks and Stalin, thousands of people were executed (Adams, 1970: 575–94).

<sup>4</sup>All the translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Jackson stated the Allies 'have done or are doing some of the very things they were prosecuting the Germans for' (Taylor, 2011: 232).

undeniable proof of the referent's existence (Barthes, 2000: 80). As for the Nuremberg photographs, for Olga these conjure unlikely associations with food, sea travel, sporting activities, or financial investment. For instance, in its striking beauty and whiteness the noose reminds the princess of 'a gigantic pretzel' or 'a rigging from a ship' (Makine, 1999a: 83), while the times when the trap opened and when the convict was pronounced dead evoke match results or 'the boring, Delphic figures showing Stock Exchange prices' (Makine, 1999a: 83). By thus qualifying the figures Olga might be referring either to their apparent obscurity or, implying a relationship of causality between Nuremberg and future wars, their prophetic quality. By comparing the figures to match results she in turn criticizes the unhealthy excitement the executions cause amongst the general public and implies that the true reason behind the trials is the urge to restore the comforting banality of everyday life.

Yet another reason for Olga's scepticism about Nuremberg is its merely symbolic quality in the face of the 'millions of people killed, burnt alive [and] gassed' (Makine, 1999a: 84). The heroine fears that the immensity of the war experience will be reduced to clichés, as illustrated by the lurid and melodramatic anecdote of Goering's wife helping her husband escape the disgrace of the gallows by slipping poison into his mouth during their final kiss. This is also why Olga sees expressions such as 'war', 'criminals', or 'triumph of justice' as imbued with 'reassuring falseness' and once again symptomatic of the general desire to forget the war, as demonstrated by the discussion about Nuremberg occurring in counterpoint to a young woman's babblings about her latest tryst (Makine, 1999a: 88). In this sense, Olga resembles other Makinean protagonists whose frontline experience proves unspeakable using the victors' totalizing language, a language which paints the war in grossly Manichean terms.

## Oedipus Regina

Olga's opposition to the mass amnesia concerning the war may be motivated, finally, by personal reasons, the incestuous relationship fostered by the Occupation satisfying the princess's narcissistic needs and her correlated nostalgia for her Russian youth. Incest, however, as I shall argue, stands here for the more general phenomenon of anomie and, more specifically, for the war's liberating influence on society. I begin elucidating Olga's position in terms of her personal situation by noting that the heroine empathizes – or even identifies – with the Nazi convicts. This is suggested, firstly, by the attention she pays to the eleven men's shut eyes, a detail gaining its significance from the fact that blindness is a recurring trope in this oedipally inspired story whose heroine initially refuses to *see* the true nature of her relationship with her son. Secondly, Arbyelina's identification with the Nazi criminals may spring from her long-standing fascination with death. Feeling partially responsible for the disfigurement of Li's face, her husband's departure, or the birth of a doomed child, Olga repeatedly fantasizes about being killed or at least gravely injured.

These morbid fantasies originate in the heroine's youth when, aware of carrying the haemophilia gene, she equated reproduction with death, imagining that, in

order not to conceive a mortally ill child, she must be killed immediately after sex. Partially satisfying this fantasy, Olga's first sexual encounter is doubly stamped with violence: dodging death during the Civil War, the princess is raped and her aggressor shot dead while still inside her. The rapist's disguise – he is dressed up as a woman – or the fact that, in Freudian terms, death signifies ultimate castration (Freud, 1923: 57), blur the gender difference between Olga and her attacker. The same can be said about the princess's incestuous relationship where the mother's and son's gender roles are systematically confused and where death serves as a running metaphor for sex. While the boy displays female characteristics (he clops about in his mother's mules, the haematoma on his chest resembles a woman's nipple and, bleeding quasi-regularly, his whole body is a quasi-unhealing menstrual wound), Olga becomes a phallic mother, that is a figure combining the qualities of both a beautiful woman and a powerful male. She does so by identifying with a three-handed Virgin Mary,<sup>6</sup> associating the gesture of probing the inside of her son's shoe with sexual penetration or internalizing L.M.'s fetish of feet and footwear. Also, Olga half-realizes that she is involved in an incestuous relationship when contemplating a picture representing an antelope and a boa locked in mortal struggle and serving as a *mise-en-abyme* for the inherently violent mother–son relationship. Despite the undeniably phallic form of the snake whose body, additionally, is described as 'muscular and prodigiously thick', for Olga the 'boa-woman' resembles a plump female thigh (Makine, 1999a: 77). The lovers' gender roles are further problematized when, by eroticizing her own corpse-like body, Olga both displays stereotypically male necrophiliac fantasies and identifies with her mortally ill son.<sup>7</sup> As for the satisfaction of her youthful fascination with the sex–death dyad, the princess likens her bedroom to a murder scene, calls her son a 'criminal', and their sex a 'killing' (Makine, 1999a: 98, 147, 146). Finally, when returning home, the heroine sees herself as a convict mounting the scaffold and, when awaiting sleep, as a 'condemned' woman (Makine, 1999a: 99).

The incestuous relationship's transgressive nature takes Olga on a nostalgic journey in time, back to the Russia of her youth, marked by two revolutions and the ensuing Civil War. The carnivalesque atmosphere accompanying the dismantling of the rigid sociopolitical order is anticipated by the fancy-dress balls given by Olga's uncle. With the ironic difference that it is the aristocracy performing the rituals of reversal usually enacted by lower social classes, in their transgression of the accepted hierarchies of birth, gender, and status as well as in their license and festive abundance, these masquerades strike the reader as Rabelaisian, their description being steeped in allusions to Bakhtin's analysis of the early Renaissance carnival as a world 'upside down' and 'inside out' (Bakhtin, 1968: 309, 370). And so the portrait of Olga's autocratic grandmother is hung head down, a servant drinks champagne

<sup>6</sup>The icon in question was painted by St. John of Damascus whose hand Virgin Mary had miraculously restored. The image thus symbolically denies castration.

<sup>7</sup>See Bronfen (1992), in particular Chapters 2 and 3.



from a guest's glass and, copulating semi-openly or gorging themselves on food, people show no restraint in satisfying their desires. The guests thus invoke the grotesque bodies that Bakhtin opposes to the classical model of corporeal integrity, individuality, and perfection, and describes as mingled together, agitated, outgrowing their own selves, subject to 'interchange and interorientation', with organs detaching themselves from the body and leading an independent life (1968: 317). During one such party Olga watches '[t]his restless [woman's] body [that] seems to grow directly out of the man's stomach. It appears as if she has no legs, while 'the fine, long cigarette she holds in one hand [...] gives the impression of fluttering about on its own in the darkness ...' (Makine, 1999a: 55). This topsy-turvy world, represented by an aristocrat dressed up as a peasant or a woman wearing a bullfighter's costume, touches even the supposedly unalterable layout of the piano keyboard when the white keys are stained by the black-tainted fingers of a man disguised as Othello.

Before threatening her life and forcing her into exile, the dissolution of class boundaries and moral constraints accompanying the revolution gave Olga an exhilarating sense of freedom. The latter is represented by the relief experienced by girls who, to stop slouching, had carried wooden planks upon their shoulders. The abolishment of this practice, which, importantly, Makine compares to crucifixion, emblemizes the disappearance from the Russians' life of all 'rectitude, correctness [and] regularity' (Makine, 1999a: 152) and conveys the fact that Soviet society cast off the yoke of both Tsarist despotism and Orthodoxy: '[A] certain order of things was cracking apart, on the brink of crumbling, or indeed there was no order, no rectitude, merely servile custom bounding them (like the plank at your back) to laws that were said to be natural' (Makine, 1999a: 152). That Makine's portrayal of the first two decades in Russia's twentieth-century history is influenced by Bakhtin's work and, as often done, stresses parallels between carnival and the October Revolution that indeed only momentarily relieved oppressive political conditions (Booker & Juraga, 1994: 2; Holquist, 1982-83; Stallybrass & White, 1986: 11), is visible from the following extract that, underlining the abolishment of social hierarchy, alludes to the carnivalized body where 'the buttocks persistently [try] to take the place of the head' (Bakhtin, 1968: 353).

[A] Siberian peasant appointed and dismissed ministers; he 'purified' (as he called these couplings) the Tsarina's ladies-in-waiting and even [...] the Tsarina herself – all of them being in thrall to his inexhaustible carnal drive. Newspapers portrayed the Tsar as an enormous oval pair of buttocks surmounted by a crown. Killing a policeman became an exploit in the name of liberty ... (Makine, 1999a: 152).

## Freedom in war

It transpires therefore that the princess dreads the return of peace for fear that, like the end of the Civil War, it will reinstate the conservative prewar mores and a

traditional family structure, thus stifling the state of anomie that Olga restages by transgressing one of our culture's two greatest taboos. Signifying – at least in Durkheimian terms – immorality, derangement, lawlessness, and normlessness, and referring to situations where social control over man's imperious biological drives is lifted (Merton, 1938: 672), the term 'anomie' seems particularly apt in the analysis of Olga's yearning for the absence of a normative moral compass in wartime. The term appears yet more appropriate given its recent association with the soldiers' experience during the Great War when 'the rules of conduct of peacetime, of normal times, [were] suddenly abolished' (Compagnon, 2014: 31). Interestingly, by representing World War II mainly as a fraternal conflict between collaborators and Resistance fighters, Makine narrows the gap between France's struggle against Nazism and the civil unrest that tore the Russia of Olga's youth. A further analogy between the two historical realities is established by Li's and Olga's play following the abortion which, as argued earlier, restores the climate of *les années noires*. Laughing uproariously, the two women impersonate the historical, fantastic, and mythological personages featured in the painted panels used by the princess's friend in her photographer's work and recapturing the carnivalesque ambiance of the 1920s, foretold by the aforementioned masquerades. Like the participants of early Renaissance carnival, the women temporarily transgress their identities while their laughter becomes, as Bakhtin would have it, a means of liberating them from not only 'the fear [...] of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power', but also – and crucially – 'the great interior censor' (1968: 94). As if to sustain their play's emancipating effect, Li announces her return to Russia where with her photography she hopes to revive the ludic, licentious, and festive time of the pre-Stalin days (Makine, 1999a: 46), a declaration coinciding with Olga's resolution to leave L.M. and devote herself to her son.

By terminating a quasi-normative relationship, the heroine wishes that 'nothing extraneous [...] any longer come[s] between her and her child' (Makine, 1999a: 70) and wants to maintain the seclusion into which her household was plunged by the war and which invokes the notion of anomie that also designates social maladjustment, isolation, and marginality (Thorn, 1984: 9). For, like many of Makine's heroines,<sup>8</sup> Olga endures a multivalent liminality made up of her exilic status, alienation from her class and both physical and metaphysical marginality in relation to the Russians of Villiers-la-Forêt, whose fortress-like residence literally turns its back on the home of this *déclassé* aristocrat. By leaving her lover Olga may also strive to preserve her single-parent family that was indeed typical under the Occupation with many men being away from home either in the *maquis*, at the front, or as labourers or prisoners in Germany. And all this to nurture a relationship that, in Olga's mind, defies the irrevocability of death, for it offers her mortally ill child a spectacle of a corpse-like body that nevertheless remains untouched by rigor mortis or decomposition, preserves its beauty and, vitally, is to be reanimated.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. the red-haired prostitute (Makine, 1999b), Charlotte Lemonnier (Makine, 1997), or Alexandra (Makine, 2003).

Thus, Olga's androgyny, acquired, amongst others, through the heroine's identification with a Virgin Mary reputed to reverse loss, is only meant to reassure the boy further in his position of the masculine survivor.<sup>9</sup>

As much as she accepts incest for the benefit of her son, Olga's crime is narcissistically grounded since it allows her to shed externally imposed and oppressive social roles. No longer a woman on the brink of old age, a wife forsaken by her husband, or a mistress humiliated by her lover, the heroine reverts to her young and extravagant self, her son becoming her childhood sweetheart galloping on horseback through an apple orchard. In this sense, *The Crime* once again evokes Makine's other novels whose protagonists—soldiers undergo an identity change by, for example, casting off their bourgeois selves.<sup>10</sup>

While possibly serving as a metaphor for liberating, wartime mores, the mother-son intimacy in *The Crime* also bears a similarity to frontline relationships that were, as Roger Marwick argues, mainly fraternal, male soldiers calling their female comrades or nurses 'sisters' or 'daughters' (2008: 417). And, when sexual, these relationships were motivated by the urge to experience physical love before dying, which is precisely why Olga, who believes this to be her last love, gives herself to an adolescent condemned to a premature death. Combined with the boy's predilection for playing soldiers (he wears his father's greatcoat and stands guard outside his family home), the leitmotifs of the unstoppable blood flow and of impending death further strengthen the analogy between Olga's son and the 'frontline generation', as the youngest recruits who did most of the dying in the Great Fatherland War have been known (Edele, 2006: 113). Considered from this angle, Olga is a reflection of other female characters of Makine's, who nurse their younger lovers before they return to the front (cf. Makine, 2002).

In the light of the preceding remarks and in the context of the Russian literary tradition where madness is often portrayed as a way of challenging authority (Rosenshield, 2003: viii), Olga's insanity can be equated with rebellion against order, whose return is heralded by the Liberation. The summer of 1947 coaxes Olga and her son out of their wartime isolation as floodwaters recede, reintegrating their household, until then akin to the island-like estate of Olga's uncle, into the Russian community. Additionally, a bridge promising a direct road link between Villiers-la-Forêt and Paris is under construction and the trees protecting the heroine's abode from view are felled. Lastly, newspapers announce that 'FRANCE FINALLY TURNS THE CORNER' (Makine, 1999a: 243) and celebrate the start of the Tour de France that, in Barthesian terms, is a myth constituting 'the antithesis of alienation' and generating 'meanings that allow experience of "communitas"' (Weber, xxi). Reunited as a nation and reinstated as a Republic in such myths (Dauncey & Hare, 2003: 3),

<sup>9</sup>Elisabeth Bronfen argues that the aesthetic staging of a woman's death may empower the male spectator and impart knowledge about his (im)mortality (Bronfen, 1992).

<sup>10</sup>While as a result of his frontline experience Volsky (Makine, 2010) forsakes his dream of becoming an opera singer and teaches music to handicapped orphans, Alexei Berg (Makine, 2002) gives up his pianist career and, having repudiated his Jewish heritage, becomes an ordinary Soviet citizen.

Olga's *terre d'accueil* sees the return of prewar values, customs, and family makeup, as evidenced by a press article discussing the holiday plans of the French and illustrated with a photograph of two parents and their children cycling. And as if in compliance with this picture, with the onset of warm weather the heroine's son chooses the company of girls while Olga herself becomes the unwilling object of Golets's advances. It is thus profoundly ironic that the boating accident that plunges Olga into mental darkness becomes, along with the announcement of Princess Elisabeth's engagement, one of the news items communicating the complete return of peace.

For the French, what the odd couple's adventure marked, above all, was the real start of the postwar era. If you could once more drift down the river in an old boat with your arms around a woman and a bottle of wine under the seat then peacetime had returned for good. The fatal turn of events only confirmed this impression. In one Paris paper a brief account of the drowning had succeeded for the first time in displacing the headline 'PURGED' that recurred in issue after issue, often with the news of death sentences. (Makine, 1999a: 34)

## Conclusions

Although Olga's only recollection of the war seems to be that of sparing her son the sight of the dead bird bought on the black market, in her reverential attitude towards the memory of the Occupation and her consequent denial of the Liberation, the heroine of *The Crime* uncannily resembles Makine's soldier-protagonists. As I have demonstrated, her stance has very complex reasons, including Olga's fear for her position as a Russian exile in France, concern about a resurgence of violence, or anxiety about her child's and her own mortality. Yet, whatever the precise rationale of the princess's attitude, the latter clearly reflects the author's own position on World War II, a conflict that Makine's oeuvre has continuously commemorated. As in the writer's homeland, in his writing the war has been the defining episode in Russian (and European) history, a glorious moment of national and transnational unity, and an event that legitimized the existence of the world's first communist state.<sup>11</sup> By vehemently protecting the war memory and at the same time offering his readers mostly its heroic facets, Makine's work nurtures two nation-building myths: that of the Great Fatherland War and the resistentalist myth, which, since the war and to admittedly different degrees in Russia and France, have been periodically revived to stoke up national pride. Like some of Makine's other novels (2003, 2014), *The Crime* marries the two myths, thus, on the one hand, flattering the author's French readers whom it reminds of their country's wartime heroics, and advocating the ideals of De Gaulle and his conservative followers, which in post-1968 France, a country that Makine sees as shackled by political correctness and xenophilia, have been sadly neglected (Makine, 2006, 2014). Simultaneously,

<sup>11</sup>For the recent revival of World War II memory in Russia, see Beumers (2000), Hosking (2002), Tumarkin (2003), or Wood (2011).

however, Olga's story, like most of the Franco-Russian author's works, is meant to restore the memory of the USSR's immense wartime effort, thus refuting its reputation as an aggressive repressor towards both its own people and other nations, and instead reasserting its status of Europe's saviour and martyr. Finally, by foregrounding Olga's refusal to forget World War II and her desperate longing for revolutionary Russia, *The Crime* betrays the author's own nostalgia for the Soviet Union of his youth, which saw the apex of the Great Fatherland War cult, a cult that has made a significant imprint upon the writer's imaginative output. It is thus evident that *The Crime* carries a political agenda, which potentially further narrows the gap between Makine's fifth novel and the French-language historiographic metafiction mentioned in the article's introduction. However, contrary to these postmodern novels which tend to disrupt and challenge dominant historiography, *The Crime*, despite Olga's disapproval of the official and necessarily reductive image of the Occupation, ends up endorsing the resistentialist myth and, by extension, the myth of the Soviet Union's pivotal role and superhuman sacrifice in saving Europe from fascism.

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