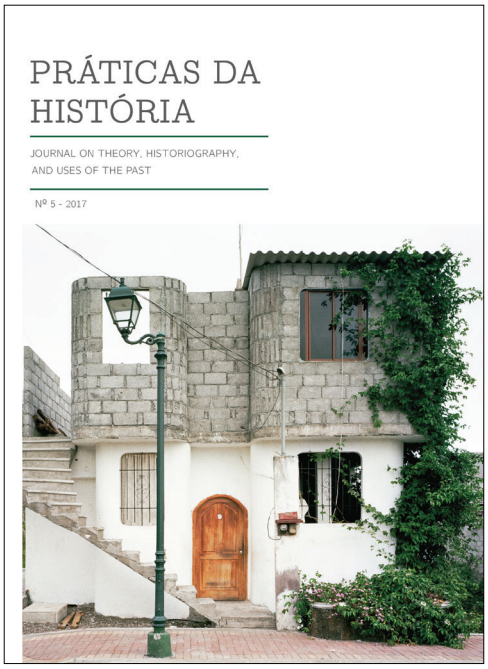

Mirrors, Rooms, and one Very Big Building

A conversation with Yuri Slezkine on Russian ethnographers, the historiography of the Soviet Union and Literature

Interview by José Neves

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Mirrors, Rooms, and one Very Big Building

A conversation with Yuri Slezkine on Russian ethnographers, the historiography of the Soviet Union and Literature. Interview by José Neves*

Yuri Slezkine is the Jane K. Sather Professor of History at the University of California and director of the Berkeley Program in Eurasian and East European Studies at the same university. He was born in Russia, in the mid-1950s, and he graduated from Moscow State University. In the early-1980s he went to Austin, Texas, where he obtained his PhD under the supervision of Sheila Fitzpatrick, a leading figure of the so-called "Revisionist School". Among Yuri Slezkine's several contributions to the history of the Soviet Union and Russia, we find his PhD thesis *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, published by Cornell University Press in 1994. In 2004 he published a new book, the *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2006), and he recently published *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2017).This conversation was held in Lisbon in November 2017. Yuri Slezkine was a key-note speaker at a conference on the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution organized by Universidade Nova de Lisboa. This conversation took place one day after he delivered his talk. Most of the conversation was conducted by José Neves but other colleagues also posed some questions to Yuri.

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José Neves (JN): *Thank you very much for being with us. I will start with a very short biographical question. How come are you able to speak Portuguese so fluently?*

* José Neves is Assistant Professor at FCSH-NOVA.

Yuri Slezkine (YS): Just so you continue to think that I speak it fluently, I'll be speaking in English, so I don't get caught. I was at the University of Moscow, in the early 1970's, when the *25 de Abril* [1974] happened and hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Soviets went to the former Portuguese colonies in Africa. There weren't many people in the Soviet Union who could speak Portuguese. So, when I was in my senior year in college, studying Medieval Russian Literature, I heard about this incredible opportunity: that I could attend one language course, study for six months or so, and then go to any former Portuguese colony and work for any organisation. I chose Mozambique and the Ministry of Merchant Marine, went to Beira, and spent a memorable year there, in 1978. Then I came to Lisbon in 1982 and spent another memorable year here. So, I spent two years of my life speaking Portuguese. Two of the best years of my life. I haven't had any practice, really, for the last 35 years, but I do occasionally listen to the radio and enjoy it immensely. Podcasts, mainly. Anyway, that's the story of my old but chequered relationship with the Portuguese language.

JN: *So, you went from one socialist country to another socialist country, from the former Soviet Union to Mozambique. What where the differences between an old and huge socialist country, the Soviet Union, in-between Asia and Europe, and this new socialist nation that was emerging from African struggles against colonialism?*

YS: At the time, I didn't think of the difference as having primarily to do with socialism. It was just a different world. Everything was different. It was my first time abroad and there is no better way to find yourself in a new world, I think, than to arrive in Maputo in 1978. And this is where we come to socialism, because the Soviet Union that I had left was a country dominated by irony. Everyone was ironic. It seemed to be the only possible intonation or mode. And there I was, in a country where so many were romantically inclined. Many of the so-called *cooperantes* (volunteer workers), from various countries, partic-

ularly from Brazil and Argentina, and to some degree the leftists from Western Europe, where there because of an idea, because of Socialism. Something that did not really exist, not only for me, but for anyone within the Soviet community in Mozambique. So, you asked about the difference. That was as far as you could get and still call it by the same name. Both countries where nominally socialist, but their view of the concept, of where they were in relation to whatever socialism was supposed to mean, were polar opposites really.

JN: *And what about Lisbon? You spent the year of 1982 here. Did you have any previous knowledge of Portuguese society and culture?*

YS: Well, I learned a little bit, I would even say a fair amount, in Beira, by making friends with Portuguese-speakers and Portuguese people in Mozambique. I had read *Os Lusíadas* in college, because I went to the Philology Department of Moscow University and Camões was part of the curriculum, in Russian translation. It was later, here, that I actually read my first Camões sonnets in Portuguese, and was tremendously impressed. But no, I don't think that, other than *Os Lusíadas*, I had read anything translated from Portuguese. I had, of course, read a great deal about the revolution and had been following the news from Portugal closely, but that is the extent of it.

The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment

JN: *Okay. Let's leave Portugal and Mozambique behind... And let me just tell you how I actually got to know your work. My own PhD thesis was on how Portuguese communist leaders and intellectuals, although they were committed to internationalism, ended up forming and imaging a Portuguese national identity, a Portuguese national culture and history. In the research process, I came across your very influential article on the policies of the Soviet Union regarding nationalities, titled "The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or: How a Socialist State Promoted*

Ethnic Particularism"[1]*. The article was published in 1994. If I can sum it up briefly for those unaware of it, there you describe how the Soviet regime, despite its internationalist background, was deeply invested in the making of national identities within the Soviet Union itself. This was done through political discourse, ethnography, language studies, and so on. The article was published few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, at the time, one of the reasons that was considered as a cause for such collapse was the Soviet oppressive attitude towards nationalities. Your article was somehow against these views. Also, by that same time and on that same issue, there was some relevant work being done by other historians, like Terry Martin's book, where the national policy of the Soviet Union was seen as an affirmative policy.*[2] *So, could you just give us a brief account of that article?*

YS: Well, yes, Terry Martin's book was part of the same approach, pretty much. The dominant view was that the Soviet Union was an evil empire and that, among the many evil things it did, was the oppression of national minorities. My article argued the opposite. Or rather, it described how the Soviet state had created, nurtured and celebrated national particularisms. How it had created an ethno-territorial federation. How remarkable the Soviet state was, as a federation, and how it actually functioned. I used the metaphor of the communal apartment to describe the situation where every union republic had a room of its own. And so, the story ends with most of the residents barricading their doors leading into the hallway where the Russians lived. The huge hallway and very large kitchen where they used to make the most important decisions and where they were now stuck. Indeed, today, if we look at the post-Soviet or post-Communist states, they are all mono-ethnic states with one exception. Not only are they mono-national states, they are explicitly, pointedly, intensely, if you will, tribal in

1 "The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or: How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, nº 2 (1994): 414-52.

2 Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

their self-representation and self-understanding. With one exception, and that exception is Russia which, at least rhetorically, remains, if you don't like it, an empire, and if you like it, a multi-national state. So, that article really did go against the current, in a sense. And so, there were all kinds of reactions. To be honest with you at this point, I am not sure I remember how it came about. I remember my first day in Maputo much more clearly... Probably it had something to do with my first book [*Arctic Mirrors*], which was about nationhood and ethnography in the Soviet Union.

JN: *And in that first book, which was your PhD thesis, Siberia was the laboratory you actually explored. Why Siberia in particular?*

YS: It was about the native people of the Arctic zone of the Soviet Union and their relationship with the Russian and Soviet state, and Russian life more broadly. Actually, the idea for that book came out of my experience in Mozambique, believe it or not. Because after my stay in Mozambique, when I, more or less by accident, ended up in graduate school in the United States, I wanted to be a historian of Portuguese Africa. But I had to teach Russian for a living and, in order to be allowed to teach Russian, I had to study something to do with Russia. I was stuck with Russia. So, I decided to apply some of my interests that had to do with empire-building, colonialism, metropolitan versus aboriginal, if you will, to the Russian case. It was only then that I realised that I had grown up in the Soviet Union without a clear idea of how Russia had gotten to be so big. I had always taken it for granted! Remarkably, the story of Russia's eastward expansion, the conquest of Siberia, is not really a part of Russian national mythology. It is hardly present in the textbooks. It is hardly present in canonical fiction, and the Russian literary canon is the bible for every Russian (it still is for me). And there I was, thinking about the Portuguese empire in Africa and at the same time exploring Texas, going to Indian reservations – I did a lot of driving around the south-western United States and I went

to some Indian reservations in Arizona, New Mexico, West Texas, and so on – and I vaguely remembered some distant echoes of similar discussions back in the Soviet Union, but I knew nothing about them. Actually, it is interesting that, when you think of these two great empires, one in the extreme west of Europe, the Portuguese one, the maritime one, and the other in the extreme east of Europe, the Russian Empire, they were built at the same time. They are almost never compared, but it was happening in the sixteenth and mostly in the seventeenth centuries, when Russia became what it became, out of Muscovy. In eighty years, a handful of people, mostly Cossacks, moved from the Urals to the Pacific. Economically, structurally, it is much more similar to the fur-trapping expansion in Canada, say. But still, there they were, at the same time, expanding in different ways and in different directions. That idea struck me as interesting and even though I abandoned the idea of an explicit comparison, I focused on the story of the hunting-gathering populations of the Russian Empire, and how they were dealt with by an endless succession of travellers, warriors, missionaries, government officials, reformers, ethnographers, later on, collectivisers, and so on. So, whatever you know about Russia, the Russian Empire, the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union, imagine those things applied to reindeer-breeders or walrus-hunters. It is a peculiar thing. And that is what I found interesting, that is what I started writing about, and that ended up being my first book. It was after dealing with problems of national difference, ethnic difference, nationalism, imagined or otherwise, for a while, that I moved on to write the article you mentioned.

JN: *You mentioned the role of Russian ethnographers in that process, throughout the twentieth century and even earlier. Were there, during the Soviet Union and before, interchanges between Russian anthropology and Western anthropology? We often have this idea that social sciences and humanities in Russia were largely dependent on the Marxist tradition. But, in the case of Soviet ethnography and anthropology, were there any similarities or even connections with the history of anthropology and ethnography in other places?*

YS: Yes, absolutely. There were lots of connections. Up until the late-1920s and early 1930s, Russian anthropologists and ethnographers were part of a much larger world of studying the other, as it were. Most of the original, at least better-known, Russian ethnographers started out as political exiles. It was in Siberia or on the Arctic coast of the European part of Russia that they discovered the people they had never heard about and who were theoretically their fellow citizens, fellow subjects of the Tsar. Some of them ended up writing very influential, very interesting, very good books. They did a lot of reading in French, German, and English on ethnology and anthropology. Later, ethnography was marginalised as part of the Cultural Revolution during the first five-year plan period. Civilised nations had history and those others had ethnography. Was that fair? That went against the Soviet sense of equality, of promoting the interests of the backward, the unfortunate and the exploited. And so, they saw ethnography, and Indo-European linguistics, as a colonial survival. Ethnography was moved, as a discipline, into history departments. And it became, for a while, the part of history that dealt with so-called primitive communist societies. In the 1960's and 70's things would change, and Soviet ethnography would, to some degree, rejoin the international academic world, while keeping its own specific features, a very important one being a dedication to ethnicity as something primary and unchangeable. Or at least, if not unchangeable, as something substantive, not easy to destroy, something inherently valuable.

The Historiography of the Soviet Union

JN: *Let me insist a little bit more on your PhD thesis, but now focusing on a different matter. Your supervisor was Sheila Fitzpatrick. You were a Soviet émigré in the United States and she was already a leading figure of the revisionist school, challenging the conservative views of some Political Science and the so-called totalitarian paradigm. How was this encounter?*

YS: Not good [laughs]. First, I did not go there in order to work with this great Soviet historian. I went there because I had been teaching English at the *Guarda Nacional Republicana*[3], in Costa da Caparica, and after several unsuccessful attempts to sell encyclopaedias to housewives and filtered-water to dentists' offices in Lisbon, I was ready to go anywhere, pretty much. I had some friends here in Lisbon who were on their way, more or less illegally, to Belgium, Switzerland or France to work and I thought I would probably go with them. But I was told that there was another way to travel and see the world, and that was to apply to graduate school in an American university. So, I thought: okay, if I get accepted, I will go to America; if not, I will work as a Portuguese manual labourer in Belgium and see what happens. It was the former option that materialised. And I, never having heard of Sheila Fitzpatrick, arrived at the University of Texas and she didn't like me one bit because, going back to your question about two kinds of Socialism, I was at the far-ironic end of the spectrum and she was at the head of the revisionist school. Since she didn't like me, I didn't like her, either. But then things changed. I obviously changed more than she did, partly because I was younger and perhaps more flexible, but also because, like so many of my fellow countrymen back then, I somehow thought that I knew everything about the country in which I grew up. And there she was, with her heavily accented Russian. What did she know? After a while, I realised just how little I knew, and how much more she knew. So, I learned a lot from her and I changed a lot as a consequence. She changed some, also. We were co-editing, or rather she talked me into co-editing a book with her, on Russian female first-person narratives. She wanted me to translate it into English, and she would write an introduction. And then, having grown up a little bit, I thought: "no". I remember telling her that we either called the book "The Women that Won the Revolution", as opposed to "In the Shadow of Revolution", which was the title, or we changed its conception.[4] And we changed it.

3 Portuguese National Guard.

4 Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (eds.), *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

She was primarily interested in the upwardly mobile, in the so-called *vydvizhentsy*, for those of you who know Russian, the "promotees", the beneficiaries of class-based affirmative action, those who benefited from Soviet socialism, indeed from the Great Terror, from educational opportunities, and so on. And my point at the time, still owing to my old Soviet background, was that, you know, that is not the whole story. Back in the day, before meeting Sheila, I would have said that was not the story at all. By then, I knew it was a really important, central, story, but certainly not the only one. So I ended up adding a bunch of white émigrés and peasants who suffered from collectivisation, that sort of thing, to give it some sort of balance. Eventually, Sheila and I became friends, and are friends today. I have great respect for her as a scholar and as a human being. And for those of you who are interested in Russian, Eastern European or Central European history, her most recent book, I think, is brilliant. It is the story of her husband as part of the story of Eastern Europe between the wars, during World War II, and immediately thereafter. That book combines her tremendous skills as a social historian with a peculiar warmth that she feels for her main character. It is unusual for a professional historical work, and I think she has done a remarkable job.

JN: *This clash, I mean this confrontation, between the so-called "Revisionist School", of which Sheila Fitzpatrick was one of the leading figures, and the so-called "Totalitarian School"... Would you say that it can be explained as a political-ideological clash, more than a scientific one? You were mentioning, for instance, that Sheila Fitzpatrick was a social historian, while the "Totalitarian School" mainly gathered political scientists and historians working on the political, more than the social, history of the Soviet Union.*

YS: I think it was highly political and perhaps primarily political. The "Totalitarian School" had been associated with the Cold War, with a particular view of the Soviet Union and with a particular desire to see

it as closely related to Nazi Germany, to represent it as the enemy of the "Free World", a concept that had been created in the late-1930's. I think it was Fernando Rosas who mentioned it as important for the Estado Novo in Portugal. So, it was obviously political, but also generational – because the political/methodological differences coincided with a generational change. Sheila Fitzpatrick, as a revisionist, as someone sympathetic to the left, someone who had come out of the left in Australia, was vilified by the Cold War establishment. I never became a revisionist, I never shared her agenda, but neither did I share the other one. I do actually find totalitarianism an occasionally useful concept, but only if you apply it to Christianity, Islam, and many other movements beyond the Nazis and the Bolsheviks.

JN: *Actually, Cold War is a concept that is used in the historiography of the United States, but not so much in the Soviet Union.*

YS: In the Soviet Union, it came into use at some point, but it was used primarily ironically. Because substantively, if the Cold War was a confrontation between two incompatible ways of life, two political, economic, and ideological systems, then obviously, from the point of view of the Soviet Union, it began in 1917. It is only when seen from the West that it looks like something that emerged out of the ruins of Europe after World War II.

JN: *I have just one more question concerning the historiography of the Soviet Union. We have the "Totalitarian School" and then the "Revisionist School", but in the last years there have been some major contributions, like yours, going beyond this dichotomy. I am also thinking about the work of Stephen Kotkin and this idea of Stalinism as a civilization.*[5] *Sheila Fitzpatrick classifies these works as "Neo-Revisionist" or "Post-Revisionist". Can you give us a brief account of what is at stake here?*

5 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

YS: There are two things that are usually associated with Kotkin's early work and that would become very influential in the 1990's. First of all, Soviet subjectivity as a particular concern and a focus on Soviet subjectivity as something, perhaps, peculiar. Or peculiarly illiberal. Jochen Hellbeck, a very good historian based at Rutgers University, has been influential in that regard. The other one is the Soviet Union as a welfare state and the degree to which it was similar to other modern states. Much of Kotkin's work was influenced by Foucault, so he was looking at the Soviet Union as a particular version of the familiar animal.

JN: *You were saying that the concept of totalitarianism sometimes proves useful but actually, in your works, you don't use it.*

YS: I use it sort of ironically, I would say. And, to some degree, in passing, in my new book, when I look at Bolshevism as a form of millenarianism. There, I think it is useful.

From the Russian Empire to *The Jewish Century*

JN: *And what about the concept of empire? There are huge discussions on how the concept can, or cannot, be applied to twentieth century informal empires, as the United States itself. Or whether it can be used to highlight the continuities between Russia as an empire and the Soviet Union. At Berkeley, you lead the Institute of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, a kind of Area Studies institute, about Eurasia. How do you see this kind of debates?*

YS: Well, it depends on how you define things, obviously. The problem with empire as a term is that it is so often used pejoratively. Empire means really big and really bad. That is not a good way to proceed. Still, it may be useful. The United States is, by most definitions, an empire. I mean, empires come in different shapes and forms. Compared

to nation-states, they are usually undertood as something internally diverse, expansive, with different legal statuses reserved for different groups, and so on. I find it useful, at least in conversation, to refer to the United States as an empire. Here we are, speaking English. It is a foreign language for both of us, so why are we speaking this language? Because that is what happens to imperial languages. That is why I remember someone I met in Mozambique, a local official in a small town, telling me: "We have been so unlucky! Our neighbours across the border were forced to speak a European language, but at least it is a language that is needed everywhere. And here we are in Mozambique... Damn, you know, who needs Portuguese?" I have been hearing this about Russian, about the heavy and unpleasant duty to learn Russian, from all kinds of people in the post-communist, post-soviet space. Russian was the language of the Soviet Empire. That empire is defunct, and English is now the first universal *lingua franca* in the history of the World. The United States is the first truly global empire, controlling the world's finances, information flows, wars, and most everything else. And that is how, indeed, I think of my own trajectory. I am Russian, and I feel strongly about it, but the closer you get to the centre of the empire, the more you feel that is where the action is. So, it is interesting to be there, and I think it makes sense to view it in that light.

JN: *At the same time, in some of the work you have done, some of the subjects you have dealt with, are subjects on the move. In a quite suggestive way, you consider the fact that Jews, throughout the interwar period, either went to the United States or, of course, to the Middle East, but also to Moscow. And does your book* The Jewish Century *has some connection with your personal trajectory?*

YS: Yes, I like to tell this story. I don't remember how old I was when I came home one day and told my father: "Mishka Ryzhevsky from apartment 13 is a Jew!" And my father said: "well, let me tell you something...". Or something to that effect. My mother's parents had

come from Argentina to the Soviet Union to build Socialism. They were originally Polish-Lithuanian Jews and they went to Birobidzhan, the Jewish Autonomous Republic on the Chinese border, and then to Moscow. Later, my grandfather was arrested and released, went to war and was killed, so my grandmother was lucky to become the widow of a war hero, instead of being the wife of an enemy of the people. My father, on the other hand, comes from the nobility. His father was a fiction writer, but his grandfather had been a general in the Imperial Army, and so was his great-uncle, and his great-grandfather and great great grandfather. As far back as we know, they had all been army officers, and I remember from my childhood pictures of my father's ancestors with remarkable, really cool, moustaches and sideburns, helmets and epaulettes. A marvel to behold. But the interesting thing is that, growing up in the Soviet Union, I cared nothing for my aristocratic ancestors. I felt strongly about my mother's family because it was associated with irony, intelligence, and opposition. Later on, when I emigrated, I realized just how Russian I was. There was nothing left of Jewishness, other than my warm memories of my grandmother and her world. But then, looking back at my high school and college years, the overwhelming majority of my friends and my parents' friends were ethnic Jews. Almost all of them were anti-Soviet. All of them were members of the Soviet intellectual elite. It was only later on that I realized that it was very interesting that there they were, Jewish and anti-communist, and almost all of them had Jewish communist grandparents. And so the question arose: how do you go from those communist grandparents to those anti-communist grandchildren, without anyone wondering how that happened? That was one of the original inspirations, if you will, for writing that book. But the real reason is that I started writing *The House of Government* twenty years ago, about the house where most members of the Soviet political elite lived in the 1930's, before being killed. And I found so many Jews in that building! And not only were there so many Jews in that building, but they acted differently from most other communists, in that they were much more consistent in their internationalism. Polish or Latvian communists could consider

themselves communists and Latvian or Polish at the same time, read Mickiewicz to their children, sing Latvian songs, and so on. Jews made the point of not doing any of that. Because internationalism meant internationalism. At the time, they didn't quite realise that it meant becoming Russian, because Russian was the language of internationalism (the way Engllish today is the language of academic exchange). So, to finish answering your question, it was at that point that I discovered, or thought that I did, that there weren't two great migrations in twentieth century Jewish history the way it is usually represented (one to Palestine, very small but highly political, and one to America, very large but not terribly political). But there was a third one! Which was as highly politicised as the one to Palestine and as large as the one to America. And that was the migration to Moscow, to Communism, huge numerically and incredibly important in early Soviet History. As you can easily imagine, it is not an easy story to tell. Not one that is to everyone's liking. But why tell stories that are to everyone's liking, right? What is the point?

JN: *Not an easy story to tell also because of the soviet relation to antisemitism, right? I mean, on the first period there were no antisemitic signs, I would say, but after the Second World War, there were.*

YS: Even before. It is difficult, precisely because it gives credence to one of the most odious Nazi tropes, Jewish commissars. But it is true that the soviet party elite was Jewish to a considerable degree. Or rather, Jews, as an ethno-religious group, were overrepresented within the Soviet elite to a much greater degree than any other group. And that story is an interesting one and worth telling, it seemed to me, without rancour, without polemics, as a story. As, in some ways, a tragic story, not that dissimilar from the one in *The House of Government*, about idealism gone wrong, in a way. Early on, the Soviet state had a strict policy of struggle against antisemitism and enforced it consistently. Then, things began to change in the late 1930s, and that had to do

with the rise of the Nazis. When Stalin's views began to change, he got rid of Litvinov, who was ethnically Jewish, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and brought in Molotov. Slowly but surely, he began to purge certain institutions, particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later, things changed radically during the war and right after, in a way you probably know about or can easily imagine, and then came to a head after the creation of Israel, when Jews, who had not been targeted during the Great Terror the way Poles, Germans, Latvians and many others had been, became a target. In other words, they joined the nationalities that were considered potential fifth-columns within the Soviet Union. So, that was when Stalin launched his antisemitic campaign, which didn't last very long. It ended, more or less, with his death, but certain restrictions on Jewish upward mobility came back in the 1960s and remained to the end of the Soviet Union. Jews were still, by any measure, the most successful ethno-religious group in the Soviet Union, if you measure it in terms of numbers of PhDs, professionals, people with higher education, members of the intellectual, artistic, and scientific elite, and so on. But their continued mobility and their presence within that elite were restricted by a Soviet state that made the point of promoting others. And that, of course, resulted in a great deal of bitterness and unhappiness.

The Making of *The House of Government*

JN: *You mentioned that you were working on this new book, The House of Government, for more than 20 years. I imagine that there were a lot of reasons for this to happen: theoretical problems, methodological problems, and so on. But also, at the same time, writing itself must had been a major challenge. It is a saga, right? A kind of epic. Where the characters have a relevant role. But on the one hand, you use well-known characters from history, like Bukharin, and, on the other hand, characters not that well-known. And you used very different sources.*

YS: The idea was to combine at least three planes. On one hand, it is a collection of family histories. It is about particular individuals and families that moved into that house, lived within that house, and then died having been thrown out of that house. It is one story. And they weren't just any old families, they were the families of the founders of the Soviet state. The original revolutionaries. Then there is the story of Soviet Literature as it attempted to mythologize that experience, to represent its deeper meaning, to represent the lives of those people through metaphors, particular plots, and so on. And the third one is the one that has to do with millenarianism. The various phases in the history of a sect, as it succeeds initially, becomes disappointed, and has to deal with that disappointment in the way that every millenarian sect has to. I tried to connect those three planes, to have them intersect in various ways. Through these characters, through some literary plots, through references and metaphors, and then through a particular analytic prism that has to do with the history of millenarian movements. That is the story of book.

*

JN: *I'll now open the floor to questions coming from other colleagues.*

Luís Trindade: *Can you tell us a bit more about the literary genre? Why the saga? Why did you feel that the saga was the appropriate narrative form to tell your story and is that related in any way to Russian literary traditions?*

YS: It does. You wouldn't have to hold up this monster of a book now if I had stuck to my original plan, which was to write something structurally related to a compact novel -- a book based on fact, entirely a work of history, but designed and structured as a novel organized around the unity of space, a conventional device. I have an epigraph from Georg-

es Perec, some of you may know him as the author of *La Vie – Mode d'emploi*, a story of a residential building. But then I thought I couldn't really do that without introducing my characters much earlier in their lives. They moved into the House of Government as forty-somethings, in the case of the men, thirty-something, in the case of the women. I didn't think that the reader could understand the fate of those people unless I started much earlier and had the reader follow them from the moment of conversion all the way through to their deaths. So, it was in the process of writing that I realised that I was working on something much bigger than a novel, generally speaking, and that it was an epic or a saga. When I say saga, I mean the story of several families, through several generations, against a rich historical background. That is what it ended up being. And, of course, Russian literature is particularly rich in those. *War and Peace* was so influential within the Russian canon and literary tradition and you can think about others, including *Life and Faith*, by Vasily Grossman, or indeed *The Gulag Archipelago* and Solzhenitsyn's endless work on World War I and the Revolution. And there are more. So, in some ways, to be really honest with you, I did at some point decide that I was writing something that was like one of those unwieldy Russian novels and might as well allow it to develop that way. And that I really should have written it in Russian. I have made many mistakes in my life, and one of them was to write this book in the wrong language. I am now fixing it, but look at its size! It is a peculiar thing, publishing the translation first and producing the original later on.

Ricardo Noronha: *Do you think that the fact that this elite of the Bolshevik government was moved into the House of Government in the early 1930's, I believe, can serve as a metaphor for the narrowing of the power structure in the Soviet Union, in a certain way? Where were they beforehand? Where they scattered?*

YS: They were scattered around downtown Moscow. They had been living in several hotels in central Moscow, converted into dormitories

for party officials. And that building was to become their home. Their first home. And that was something very controversial and very challenging. Because what is a home for communists? For people who had been nomadic for all of their lives before that. Can communists have a home? And if so, what should it look like? You will find in the book, if you read it, that there was a lot of debate about whether families were compatible with Communism, whether family apartments were compatible with the building of Socialism, and so on. That that building was to be the first of many. It was the prototype of communist domesticity. And yet, it was a compromise to begin with. Not quite fully communal, not quite fully "bourgeois". And it remained the only one. That is, if you will, a very good metaphor. That it was to be one of many and it remained the only one. And that it was going to be really special, and I don't think there is a single person in Russia who does not think that it is exceedingly ugly. Which is also, probably, kind of a fitting part of that same metaphor.

JN: *I have one question that has to do with the building. Do the people that walk by in Moscow today have any idea of the role of the building? What is the memory of the Soviet Union in today's Russia?*

YS: Well, everyone knows about this building. Not because of me, but because of Yuri Trifonov, a very good writer, and his novella *The House on the Embankment*. Everyone in Russia knows it as the House on the Embankment and thinks of Trifonov's novella. My book is secondary to Trifonov's If you already have Camões as your national poet, then, even if you are Fernando Pessoa, you can't lay claim to that title because it has been taken. So, Trifonov is there and my book will be next to his in immortalizing that building and that experience[laughing] But, it is still an elite building. As I said, it is not liked by anyone, but it is appreciated for its location, because there it is, on an island, with large windows and tremendous views of the Kremlin. Just a heavenly view, particularly at night, when it is lit-up. And then there is the view

towards the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, and that is also something to see. I don't know how many of you know it, but it was Russia's largest church, and it was blown up on Stalin's orders to make way for the Palace of Soviets, which was to be the ultimate public building of all time, and which was never built. That is almost too cheesy of a metaphor. They spent several years trying to build it and then they gave up, and transformed it into the world's largest outdoor swimming pool. Then the pool was drained, and the cathedral restored, in one of the first symbolic acts of the post-communist regime. Anyway, there it is, overlooking the Kremlin and the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, filled with some descendants of the original residents, not too many, and various other elite types: new corporate heads, foreign correspondents. I remember going there when I was a college student for the first time. By the way, one other thing everyone knows about it is that it is covered with memorial plaques, the way a really old pair of jeans is covered with patches. So and so lived in this building, and so and so lived in this building. It is like armour. It is a big building, but there were a lot of so and so's livings there. And now that people are going to read my book, there are going to be pilgrimages there! They are going to carry my book, or maybe the electronic version, looking at it and saying: "this was where so and so jumped out of the window."

André Dias: *I have two questions. By the end of yesterday's session, a professor of musical sciences here, Mário Vieira de Carvalho, said that in the arts the Bolsheviks were conservative, they prolonged the tradition. There was no rupture. And, supposedly, millenarism should be a rupture with the old. The other question deals with your connection with literature. Obviously, it has to do with your background and you keep mentioning it and in* The House of Government *you pay particular attention to it. But I haven't noticed any reference to film. I was wondering if, from the methodological point of view, as an historian, you relate differently to those two materials, to those two kinds of documents?*

YS: First of all, on the rupture. It is, I think, true that many of the so-called Old Bolsheviks weren't terribly sympathetic to the *avant-garde*. It is also true that during the Revolution, during the Civil War and in the 1920s, it was the avant-garde that ruled the day. That was how most communal buildings were designed. That was what half of the House of Government was like. It was, indeed, not a clear relationship. But there were different types of millenarianism. People's expectation of the end of the world as we know it, and the coming of something entirely different, where expressed in different ways. Most *avant-garde* artists, filmmakers, theatre directors, painters, and so on, were younger than my protagonists and came from a different *milieu*. Many of them joined the Revolution later. But they were the ones who mythologized, depicted it and became terribly important in the history of the Russian Revolution. On your second question, it is, again, partly deliberate, partly not. The part that is not deliberate is that the building has a theatre, which is still there, and a movie theatre, which is also still there. And I found a terrific archive covering the life of that theatre. It is one of my favourite stories in the book, this theatre and its very interesting director. Imagine the building, which is itself a kind of stage, and within that building there is a theater stage. But I did not find the archive of the movie theatre. Or rather, it is there, but there was virtually nothing in it. So, that is partly how a book such as mine is different from an actual saga, or epic, in that I can't invent anything. I either find things or I don't. If I had the talent and the desire to write a work of fiction, it wouldn't have taken me twenty years. But I am not going to complain, too late now. But there is also the deliberate part. I wasn't completely heartbroken by the fact that I did not find a good archive on the history of the movie theatre. Because film did not play an important role in those people's lives and because I was not making a film, but writing a book. There are two reasons, in other words. One is that, for my characters, there was nothing more important, other than Communism itself, than literature. That is how they met. That is what they did in prison. That is what they did in exile. That is how they understood their lives. Through reading. And that is how they raised

their children. Literature is a key character in the book. And, number two, I was writing, and I wanted to make a connection between what I was writing and whatever they were reading and writing.

Anonymous: *In your first study,* The Arctic Mirrors*, you wrote about the huge discussions among Soviet ethnographers, about ethnohistory, Bromlei school, and so on. After that you wrote the article about national politicies in the Soviet Union, and it had a huge repercussion. Was that, in part, due to the fact that most Sovietologists did not study the schools of Soviet ethnography? They did, sometimes, use material from the Soviet ethnographers concerning the small peoples, the situation in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, but didn't study the theories that these ethnographers were discussing.*

YS: I think you are right, probably. I think it came as a surprise, partly for that reason. People hadn't been paying attention to some of those debates. And partly because, at least for Soviet historians based in the West, for the longest time no one really was interested in the ethnic component of the Soviet experience. The only people interested in it were people championing a particular national cause. So, up until a certain point, the few books that were being produced about non-Russian nationalities were written by the representatives of those nationalities and, invariably, their fate was seen as unique and particularly difficult. The existence of the Soviet state and its peculiar ethno-territorial form was taken for granted, and few people asked how it actually came about and why it came about this way. Why would the most universalist movement, if you don't like the word sect, of the twentieth century, create the first ethno-territorial federation in history? It doesn't make any sense, if you think about it. That was the initial incentive for me to write that article. And it surprised people so much that still, 23 years after, it is the most downloaded article in the history of the *Slavic Review*. It is still surprising to some people. Because, you know, the Soviet Union was supposed to be bad and the Russian Empire was

supposed to be the prison of nations. And the Soviet Union must have been a prison, too, and maybe it did end up being that, depending on which part of the empire you are looking at and what your criteria are. But the fact remains that convinced internationalists, who despised nationalism, built their state around ethnicity. And that is the story that struck me as important, as interesting and essential, and that is the story that I tried to tell in that article.

JN: *And how was your argument received and discussed within scholars from the new nation states, from Ukraine, from Latvia, etc. Your argument was well accepted?*

YS: Well, by now it is. Originally, there were some very unhappy people. Because, you know, if you are struggling against Soviet colonialism and someone is telling you that it was the Soviet state that actually created some of those nation-states in the first place, you will not be happy. But by now it has become accepted, I would say. President Putin has not read my article, but there is no doubt that that's his main objection to the Soviet state. That it created the structure that would lead, eventually, to the creation of a bunch of nation-states. And that is what is important to him. And not only to him. It did leave 25.000 Russians as second-class citizens in a bunch of mono-ethnic states. Which is not, you know, politically correct to dwell on, but it is a fact that I think will continue to shape politics in that part of the world.

Ricardo Noronha: *Going back to the building, when building the House of Government, did the Soviet leadership follow any kind of precedent? Did they look at the Kremlin as an inspiration? I think the Chinese Communist Party took hold of the Forbidden City for the same purposes, but I am not sure. So, was there a previous paradigm which they followed? And did it inspire other similar solutions in other Socialist countries?*

YS: Yes, it definitely did. It did have descendants, but not obvious ancestors. The architect did travel to the United States and admired some of the skyscrapers. But he would connect that experience to his next project, the Palace of Soviets. There is no mention of the use of that model in the construction of the House of Government. Throughout the 1920s, there were lots of debates among architects and others about communal living and communal buildings, and what they meant. As I mentioned it briefly before, the family is the most difficult institution and clearly there is nothing worse than the family when it comes to producing inequality, hierarchy, nepotism and corruption. The family is an inexhaustible source of all those things. If you want to build a society based on equality, you have to destroy the family. Because, I don't know about you, but I prefer my own son to other people's children. And whatever you do to me, it is not going to change that basic fact. And when I was marrying my wife, I promised to discriminate against all the other women in her favour. The Bolsheviks were aware of this. They weren't as good at thinking about this as some Christians, but they knew that is where the problem was. And the architects discussed it all very vigorously. It is paradoxical but true that the collectivist society was about individuals. Because, to create new collectives, you have to break-up the previous ones. Basically, any collection of Soviets could end up being a meaningful collective. Which meant that first you had to create interchangeable individuals. That is the thinking that went into designing those communal buildings. But nobody really wanted to live there, certainly not the people who were building the Soviet Union. So, they ended up in family apartments and they knew that they were living a lie, in some sense. That is one of the things that I say that is not to everyone's liking, and that is that they were guilty. They weren't guilty of what they were being accused of, but many of them felt guilty because there they were, living bourgeois lives, as far as they were concerned, in bourgeois apartments, within families. And what do families do? Someone was saying yesterday that revolution stood for hope, and we shouldn't abandon hope, and we should keep changing and reforming things. Fair enough. All I am saying is that

there is a limit to how much we can transform ourselves. The fact that you prefer your son to other people's children does not bode well for universal brotherhood.

JN: *Final question: what are your future plans in terms of your academic work?*

YS: My plan for the future, first of all, is to finish the Russian version of my life's work. To write the original. And then to retire to Portugal and join all those English and Dutch people who live here, except that my Portuguese is better, I think. To my shame I haven't read any António Lobo Antunes, for example, so I have a lot of catching up to do [laughs].

JN: *Obrigado a todos e obrigado Yuri Slezkine.*

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