PRELUDE

Bury That Part of Oneself

"It is windy. A blindfolded person is brought to a precipice accompanied by rhythmic blows on a tambourine. The rhythm quickens, and then stops. A command is given, and with a wild cry the person leaps down like a bird."

So began an article, entitled "From the Precipice into the Grave and Back," that ran in the newspaper Argumenty i Fakty *(2001) (Arguments and Facts), which described a live-burial ritual known as "extreme training."*

The article continued, quoting the coordinator, Aleksandr Savkin: "It's all very simple—in any situation a person is controlled by two forces. One [force] says, 'You are young, strong, beautiful—go ahead and jump, and everything will work out for you.' The other mutters, 'You are a bit old, you have no connections and very little money. What the hell do you need this for?' The question is, which force will win out? That's how it is. They bring you to the precipice and say, 'Change your breathing, change your consciousness, jump.' And in that moment there is an internal struggle: 'Oh God, I have a newborn daughter, a handicapped mother. What am I doing? Why do I need this nonsense?' On the one hand, it's intriguing; on the other, it's horrifying. But the person jumps, and at that moment something actually changes inside. What it is, exactly, is impossible to describe; nevertheless, some have

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described it as a bit like sex. This feeling is recorded somewhere internally, on the physical level. And then every problem is resolved by remembering the jump. We have been leading people to the precipice for three years. They always jump."

Savkin asserts, however, that true self-knowledge comes in the grave, in that "last refuge." As an air duct is installed, the person can "comfortably think," eventually falling asleep to the rhythmic drumming of the tambourine. On coming into contact with the "energetic body of the earth" through the grave, the person is given the strength to commune with himself or herself. The ultimate goal is to "bury that part of yourself that disturbs your ability to live, to love and be loved." Through the ritual, "the person is reborn to a new and better life."

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The term *post-Soviet* invokes death and rebirth.[1] It marks a threshold and a kind of jump—from one system into another, from one life into another. Viewing 1991 as an opportunity to drive the final stake through the heart of communism, Western nations and international aid agencies made loans and grants of billions of dollars to help along economic restructuring in the 1990s. In accordance with the Washington Consensus, it was thought that marketization would naturally lead to democratic institutions and the growth of civil society (a view that proved to be wrong). Under Boris Yeltsin, reformers implemented "shock therapy," swiftly privatizing state assets at bargain-basement prices and enacting a variety of austerity measures, including reduction of budget deficits, the elimination of subsidies, price liberalization, and tightening of the credit supply, to free the economy from state control (Wedel 1998, 45–82). The reforms sent Russia lurching through a series of sharp turns. While some got rich quickly, many were left extremely vulnerable to massive inflation and diminishing savings, shrinking entitlements, currency devaluation, recession, and joblessness. As analysts put it sardonically after Russia's 1998 recession, the reforms turned out to be "too much shock, too little therapy" (Ledeneva 2006, 10).

During my fieldwork in 2005–13, the political order in Russia was still shaped by the legacy of the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. In particular, the vast inequalities that emerged during privatization were still apparent. However, with the rise of Vladimir Putin in 1999–2000, a new political formation had also taken shape. Certain strategic industries, such as oil and gas, were pulled back into the state orbit. The oligarchy that had risen to power in the 1990s was entrenched and brought more closely into the fold of Russian state power.

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The institutions with which people had contact, meanwhile (those dealing with housing, pensions, health care, and education), saw a new mixture of reforms that were not exactly neoliberal. Pensioner benefits were monetized in 2005; however, the cash payments were made by the state. Private insurance became more widespread; however, public health services, such as they were, remained available. Putin's merger of marketization with basic welfare support was accompanied by a more muscular discourse against the West; his popularity rose and has yet to wane. As I refine these pages, eighteen years after his rise to power, he remains in the Kremlin.

Russia's course from the Soviet collapse to the present is often discussed in these kinds of terms—that is, in terms of democratization, privatization, and liberalization—but it carved up lives, too. As Soviet life was "unmade" in the 1990s (Humphrey 2002), those reforms were projected into persons and communities, raising a series of fundamental questions about politics, the social order, and relationality in the context of a postsocialist market revolution. Those questions continued to be urgently present for those whom I met in the 2000s, who struggled both with what Russia no longer was and with what it could be under the Putin regime. *Shock Therapy* offers an account of some of the answers that people gave through an ethnographic inquiry into another fascinating post-Soviet phenomenon—the revitalization of psychologically oriented psychotherapies. In contrast to the biomedical materialist approach that had dominated Soviet psychiatry since the 1930s (Joravsky 1989), a psychology boom swept Russia in the 1990s, giving rise to new pop psychologies, markets for personal-growth seminars, and even publicly available mental health care.[2] A wide range of people found their way into psychological-service provision, and collectively their work spoke to new ways of understanding the self, the other, emotions, disorder, healing, and potential at a time when Russia was also transforming.

The title, *Shock Therapy*, is meant to be provocative. The therapeutic transformations I describe were not simply (or at least only) the neoliberal therapy that was said to be missing from the shock of rapid privatization. The variety of therapeutic practices that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s escape simple labeling; they were dynamic, eclectic practices that took shape in the context of the equally dynamic political conditions of the post-Soviet period, ranging from the wild capitalism of the 1990s and the unmaking of Soviet life, to the autocratic turn under Putin and the ongoing shocks of (un)employability, poverty, social risk, and rentier capitalism. I show how, in attending to the self in times of social change in Saint Petersburg in the 2000s, practitioners and

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clients asked a series of vital questions: How should I love and labor? What do I owe others, and what am I owed? What should I expect of my child? Who am I? What is our future? Who are "we"? What is a good life? Should the jump, as it were, be made confidently or hesitantly? The answers they gave, shaped by new psychotherapeutic modalities, reimagined the self, as well as the terms of political and social life, and of success and failure, in a changing Russia.

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