

**National Research University Higher School of Economics**

as a manuscript

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**VASILY AKSYONOV'S POSITION  
IN THE LITERARY FIELD BETWEEN 1968 AND 1979**

Dissertation Summary  
for the purpose of obtaining  
academic degree Doctor of Philosophy in Philology and Linguistics

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Moscow 2024

**General description of the work.** This study is devoted to the most unexplored and, at the same time, the most complex period of Vasily Pavlovich Aksenov's work, which occurred in the 1970s. The problem of periodization of Aksenov's prose is of great interest to both domestic and foreign literary critics. One of the first attempts to distinguish and analyze the stages of Aksenov's evolution was made by the Soviet critic A.N. Makarov back in 1967 [Makarov 1967]. The well-known concept of periodization in Western Slavistics was introduced by the Danish scholar Per Dalgård in the 1980s and finalized by the American Slavist Konstantin Kustanovich in the early 1990s. Dalgård divides the author's literary career into three periods: "happy" (1958-1963), "angry" (1963-1970) and "desperate" (1970-1979), without providing convincing reasons for distinguishing between the second and third periods after 1970 [Dalgård 1982]. The calendar boundary of decades seems to be an insufficient reason for Kustanovich, and he includes all the seventies in the second period by Dalgård, from 1963 to 1979. He leaves Aksenov's works from the late 1950s outside of his focus in the first period, which only covers 1960 to 1963 [Kustanovich 1992]. The periodization developed in a recent dissertation by I.V. Popov appears to be the most reasonable and meets the objectives of our research. According to Popov, the first successful stage of Aksenov's work, which was mainly associated with "confessional youth prose" (1959-1968), was followed by a second phase, which was much more controversial (1968-1979) and consisted of both "samizdat" texts and official publications in the USSR, with a hint of hidden opposition [Popov 2006].

The texts from the second period (1968-1979) were selected as **the object** of this study, as their poetics are noticeably more complex than the "thaw" works that brought the author recognition (we are mainly talking about the novels "Colleagues" (1960), "Star Ticket" (1961), and "Oranges from Morocco" (1963)). **The subject** of this study is the evolution of the poetic style in Aksenov's writings from 1968 to 1979. Its increasing complexity is caused by the rapid (although long overdue and, in a way, logical) changes in the political climate, which have also affected the field of literature.

**The material** for our research includes both *officially published texts* (including the novel "Surplussed Barrelware", the children's stories "My Grandfather is a Monument" and "A Chest in Which Something Knocks", the spy thriller "Gene Green – Untouchable" (written in collaboration with Grigory Pozhenyan and Ovid Gorchakov), the historical novel "Love of Electricity", the American essays "Round the Clock Non-Stop", and the novel "Search of a Genre") and *uncensored texts* by Aksenov. These are represented, first of all, by the uncensored novels "The Burn" and "The Island of Crimea". We also took into account the *texts that the author thought were publishable*, but they never appeared in the Soviet press. The case of the novel "Our Golden Hardware" is particularly fascinating. According to the writer's plan, he was supposed to become a censored counterpart of "The Burn". However, due to an editorial ban, it appeared alongside "The Burn" after Aksenov's emigration, in 1980. The dual nature of the Brezhnev era and its vague publication policy unexpectedly manifested themselves here.

After the events of 1968, when Soviet troops entered Czechoslovakia and ended the Prague Spring, as well as the defeat of the "Surplussed Barrelware", which "was recognized by critics as an example of malevolent and harmful modernist tendencies" [Sidorov 2012], Aksenov stepped down from the role of the informal leader of young prose writers of the 60s. An intermediate period of searching for a genre and balancing between the position of a published Soviet writer and an internal emigrant began, culminating in the publication of the uncensored almanac "Metropol" in 1979. "The purpose of this action <...> was really to expand the scope of <...> Soviet literature" [Kabakov, Popov 2011: 154], according to the authors who compiled it. Among them were well-known writers (except Aksenov, these are B. Akhmadulina, A. Bitov, A. Voznesensky, F. Iskander), and famous figures of the underground (Yu. Kublanovsky, Y. Karabchievsky), and authors with a more controversial reputation who do not belong to either of these two groups (G. Sapgir and B. Vakhtin). The attempt to openly circumvent censorship did not please the literary authorities: each of the 23 authors of the almanac suffered in some way for their passion for freedom of expression and the press. E. Popov and V. Yerofeyev

were expelled from the Union of Writers, and Aksenov, along with S. Lipkin and I. Lisnyanskaya, left it in protest. The following year, 1980, Aksenov left the USSR and went into nine years of exile.

Aksenov's literary path in 1968-1979 consists not only of a series of compromises (sometimes very dubious). It is also a journey from one literary and human dream to another: being disappointed, Aksenov tirelessly reinvented his literary *raison d'être*. In this research, we will try to trace the pathway of this journey.

Thus, **the goal** of this dissertation is to investigate the relationship between V.P. Aksenov's personal artistic development and the socio-cultural context of Soviet literature in the 1970s. Specifically, we will explore how Aksenov's need for new genres, his own style and his separation from socialist realism were influenced by the changing social and cultural climate at the time. Additionally, we will analyze Aksenov's literary strategies and how they are reflected in his writings from 1968 to 1979.

The set goal involves solving **the following tasks**:

1) To formulate the results of Aksenov's successful "thaw" period and consider the story "Surplussed Barrelware" (1968) as a peak and boundary text for this period;

2) To study Aksenov's "niche" prose of various genres, including the children's stories "My Grandfather Is a Monument" (1969) and "A Chest in Which Something Knocks" (1976), as well as the parody of the spy thriller "Gene Green – Untouchable" (1972) (co-authored with Grigory Pozhenyan and Ovid Gorchakov) and the historical novel "Love of Electricity" (1969) (series "Fiery Revolutionaries");

3) To investigate the issue of censorship / uncensorship in the literature of the 1970s through the example of the novels "Our Golden Hardware" (1973) and "Search of a Genre" (1978) and their publication history;

4) To consider the translation of E.L. Doctorow's novel "Ragtime" (1975) and the American essays "Round the Clock Non-stop" (1976) as a significant stage in the development of Aksenov's dialogue with American culture;

5) To analyze the uncensored novels "The Burn" (1969-1975) and "The Island of Crimea" (1979) in relation to Aksenov's gradual separation from official Soviet literature.

In accordance with the tasks set, we have chosen a diverse **methodology**. Establishing links between the changes in Aksenov's reputation in the 1960s and the new Brezhnev era, his texts and powerful literary institutions (the Union of Writers, critics, magazines), we turned to the theory of the field of literature proposed by P. Bourdieu. According to the French sociologist, the literary field affects "all those who enter the field in different ways, depending on their position" [Bourdieu 2005: 368-369], therefore, we first of all tried to find out how Aksenov's position in the literary field shifted during the decade we are interested in, and what influence his habitus as an agent of the field had on this change.

The most notable and relevant attempt to apply Bourdieu's methodology to the literature of the last Soviet decades can be considered M. Berg's book "Literaturocracy" [Berg 2000]. Berg's approach suggests that "the process of assigning values during the implementation of a particular author's strategy can be examined, including when considering specific features of the text" [Berg 2000: 12]. In this study, we apply this approach, identifying changes in Aksenov's position based on the evolution of the poetics of his texts of the 1970s.

In order to better understand the historical and literary context of Aksenov's work from the 1970s, we often refer to "History of Russian Criticism: The Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras", edited by E. Dobrenko and G. Tikhanov. In this book, the chapter titled "Mutations of Sovietism and the Fate of Soviet Liberalism in Literary Criticism of the Seventies: 1970-1985", is particularly relevant to our research [Dobrenko and Tikhanov (ed.) 2011]. As part of our "close reading" of the texts, we use the methods of narratology based on the work of W. Schmid "Narratologia" (2003).

Solving problems related to the translation of E.L. Doctorow's novel, we turn to comparative analysis, as well as to the theory of translation, as formulated in the works of Lawrence Venuti, among others [Venuti 1995].

For the analysis of "The Burn" and other uncensored texts by Aksenov, not only methods of narratology, but also the theory of trauma turned out to be productive: both in the psychological and psychoanalytic understanding of Donald Kalsched [Kalsched 1996], and in its interrelationship and influence on the narrative, which is explored, among others, by Cathy Caruth [Caruth 1996]. Analyzing the diversity of Aksenov's texts from the 1970s, we turn to the methods of genre criticism, which was elaborated by M.M. Bakhtin [Bakhtin 1996: 159-206].

**Degree of development of the research topic.** The main vector of the study of literature of the Brezhnev era was set by the collective work "The Seventies as a subject of the history of Russian culture" [Rogov (ed.) 1998]. The collection, which is methodologically important for us, does not concern Aksenov's creative development in the era under study. The anthropological approach developed in the monograph "It was forever until it was over. The last Soviet generation" [Yurchak 2014] was methodologically significant for this dissertation. However, Yurchak's study is outside the literary analysis perspective and does not consider the texts of the author we are interested in. Among the studies specifically devoted to Aksenov, it worth highlighting Yu.K. Shcheglov's commentary on the book "Surplussed Barrelware", clarifying the nature of the crucial Aksenov text, which became the first step towards separating him from Soviet socialist realism [Shcheglov 2013].

The most relevant work in relation to the issues discussed in my dissertation is the collection of scholarly papers titled "Vasiliy Pavlovich Aksënov: A Writer in Quest of Himself" [Moziejko et al. 1986]. Boris Bricker, the author of the article "In Search of a Genre: The Meaning of the Title and the Idea of a 'Genre'", included in the collection, makes a number of valuable observations on the flagship novel "In Search of a Genre". However, he leaves open the question of its relationship with other texts by Aksenov, both published and "underground", from the 1970s, such as the American travelogue "Round the Clock Non-Stop".

Literary critics and scholars mainly focus on writer's prose of the sixties, which brought him all-Union fame, due in large part to the multimillion-circulation

of the Yunost magazine. It published the famous stories of the writer, to which many studies are devoted (see, for example, an thoughtful analysis of Aksenov's prose of the 60s in a generalizing article: Rassadin 2007). Among them is a methodologically important analysis of the story "Victory", performed by A.K. Zholkovsky [Zholkovsky 2014] and an article by American researcher Greta N. Slobin, analyzing Aksenov's small prose in "Youth" [Slobin 1987]. The emigrant period of Aksenov's work has also been widely explored. It often includes the novels "Our Golden Hardware", "The Burn" and "The Island of Crimea", which were not published in the USSR until Perestroika and appeared in the American press in the early 1980s (B. Bolshun, V. Linetsky). The collection of articles published following the results of the conference "Russian Literature in Emigration: The Third Wave" (University of Southern California in Los Angeles, 1981) is indicative in this regard. The main part of the articles devoted to Aksenov in the collection analyzed the novels "The Burn" and "The Island of Crimea" [see, for example, Proffer 1984].

First published in the USA, the novel "The Burn" was more often the subject of research by Western Slavists [see the review article "Vasily Aksenov in American literary criticism": Efimova 1995], whereas in Russian he is mainly devoted to critical articles (A. Vasilevsky, E. Ponomarev, V. Soifer). Priscilla Mayer was among the first American scholars of Russian studies to focus on the writer. In her work "Aksenov and Stalinism: Political, Moral, and Literary Power", she thoroughly examined "The Burn" and other significant novels by V.P. Aksenov. [Meyer 1986]. Despite the fact that there are controversial theses in Mayer's interpretation, she conducts a thorough intertextual analysis of "The Burn", studying its connection with Mikhail Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita" and the Russian literary tradition in general. Among the Russian critical reviews of Aksenov's novels relevant to us, we especially note the article by A.S. Nemzer "A strange thing, an incomprehensible thing", where "The Burn" and "The Island of Crimea" are subjected not only to careful comparison, but also to a deep philological analysis [Nemzer 1991].

**The relevance** of our research is due to the fact that the solution of the tasks set in it is intended to fill a significant gap in the study of Aksenov's oeuvre. Texts published in the 70s fall into the "gray zone" for Aksenov's biographers and literary critics because of their "secondary importance": many of them are embedded in already formed literary "niches" filled by writers and poets whose original texts are difficult to get into print or are not published at all. However, the division into two poles – "true" independent uncensored texts and "forced", insincere "official" texts – not only simplifies and mythologizes the motley and ambiguous literary situation, but also goes back to the ideological attitudes of the 1970s [Rogov (ed.) 1998: 33]. The writer Georgy Sadovnikov cast back his mind: "'Netlenki', 'nuzhniki' are words from our slang of that time. There was a joke around the CDL<sup>1</sup>: 'I've been exerting myself all the year round, writing the 'nuzhnik', now, finally, I'm going to do the 'netlenka'.'" [cit. according to: Esipov 2012: 83].

The study of Aksenov's literary position during the "stagnation years" allows us to contribute to the discussion of the complex socio-cultural situation in the penultimate decade of the Soviet Union's existence, which remains relevant in modern literary scholarship. Aksenov's experience of balancing the position of a Soviet writer and an internal emigrant presents a contradiction to the theory that in the 70s an "independent" culture was formed as a conscious alternative to the mainstream Soviet culture [Rogov (ed.) 1998: 33]. Officially remaining a part of Soviet literary life, respecting the proposed rules, trying to fit his texts from the 1970s within the genre frameworks permitted by literary authorities, Aksenov became increasingly aware of his exclusion from Soviet literature, leading to a complete break - the publication of the almanac "Metropol" (1979).

**The scientific novelty** of the study is as follows: the main uncensored novels by Aksenov – and primarily his *opus magnum* "The Burn" – are for the first time considered in combination with his "niche" prose, the translation of "Ragtime" by Doctorow and officially published texts in the USSR, on which he was working

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<sup>1</sup> CDL (ЦДЛ) – CHW – Central House of Writers.



simultaneously with "The Burn". The censored prose and genre searches of the 70s not only unexpectedly highlight the writer's top novels, but also allow us to gain a new insight into the issue of the correlation between censorship and self-censorship in Soviet literature of the "stagnation years".

**The results of the conducted research. Chapter one. "The Soviet Dream": a Free Soviet writer with a human face**

In the first chapter, we were faced the task of discovering with what literary and reputational baggage Aksenov entered the period of interest to us. To solve this task, we chose and analyzed two polar texts of Aksenov's 60s: his debut novel "Colleagues" (1959) and his surrealist novel "Surplussed Barrelware" (1968). The first paragraph **1.1. The Heir of the "Thaw"** is devoted to the literary position of Vasily Aksenov in the 1960s. According to the writer and friend of Aksenov, Yevgeny Popov, "only the thaw made Vasya a writer, a writer of the sixties". This role presupposed Aksenov's stay in the official field of Soviet literature. He, like his comrades, the poets of the sixties Bella Akhmadulina, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky and others, were the true stars of the generation: they earned not illusionary, but sincere love of readers, the opportunity to travel abroad as representatives of progressive young Soviet literature. In this sense, Aksenov, like other Sixtiers, was significant for the authorities. Despite Nikita Khrushchev's criticism in 1963 during a meeting of government representatives with the creative intelligentsia, Aksenov did not lose his position, and soon after this meeting he went to Argentina.

To the question of how the young doctor Aksenov managed to find himself in the center of Soviet literary life, the second paragraph seeks to answer, in which we consider "**Colleagues**" (1959) as a text that was initially conformist and brought the author all-Union fame. The idea of "a novel with a scientific medical problem, with elements of fiction, lyrics, etc." originally belonged to V.P. Kataev, then editor-in-chief of *Yunost*, one of the major magazines of the era. He also suggested a name. Aksenov was suitable for the role of the author both by age and profession. Of course, one should not belittle his merits and think that any 27-year-old doctor would

have coped with this task. It is Aksenov who finds "a brilliant technique – boyish naivety accompanying a high phrase. Naivety is the strength of the early Aksenov texts", according to philologist E. Ponomarev [Ponomarev 2001: 217]. Thus, the debut "Colleagues" marks the point from which the writer's further attempts can be counted at first only to "push the walls apart", and then "break through", as he later described in 1989 [Aksenov 2014: 281]. In the early sixties, this meant a certain opportunity to finish and publish the already "not quite conformist" "Ticket to the Stars" (1961) [Aksenov 1994b: 5]. As it is easy to establish from Aksenov's correspondence with his mother, the idea of the story "about the 'superfluous', about those who is attracted by big cities", dates back to at least September 1958. At the height of the "thaw", Aksenov was attracted by the dream of a career as a Soviet writer who "writes properly and only what he wants on his own".

Driven by this dream throughout the sixties, he comes to a surreal, liberating, but in fact still quite "Soviet" text – **"Surplussed Barrelware" (1968)**, which we consider in the third paragraph. In "A Tale with exaggerations and dreams" (subtitled "Barrelware") Aksenov too clearly moves away from the poetics, aesthetics and special Soviet romanticism of his early writings. Precisely what was treated seriously in the debut novels was subject to ironic distancing in "Barrelware": "Aksenov depicts the world in the twilight phase, a "fin de siècle" world, formed, overripe, and secretly hungry for radical change". Aksenov perceived his new novel as a breakthrough within the framework of Soviet literature, while critics loyal to the authorities staged a real persecution, encouraged by the district committee of the CPSU, which issued a decree on the "depravity" of the novel.

**The following conclusions** can be drawn from what is described in the First Chapter. Aksenov's main achievement at the first stage of his writing career is that, by demonstrating his loyalty to literary authorities, he loudly declared himself and gained the attention of a young and progressive audience. As we show in the First Chapter, it was popularity among readers who share the "Thaw" values that created Aksenov's reputation as a leading author of the 1960s, which the literary authorities had to reckon with even after the end of "Thaw". In the late 1960s, Aksenov had to

say goodbye to both the "thaw" and the "Soviet dream" of an honest and free writer in the USSR. The writer, who tended to experiment with style and pursue stylistic freedom, now entered a new era, the distinctive feature of which was ambivalence. His further search for the genre proceeds in two directions – explicit and hidden, and in the late 60s and early 70s, a compromise still seems quite possible.

**Chapter two. The dream of compromise.** The material for the first part of this chapter was Aksenov's texts of the 70s, which he considered suitable for censored publication. Among them: the novel "Love of Electricity" (1969) about the revolutionary L.B. Krasin (the series "Fiery Revolutionaries"); the children's story "My Grandfather is a Monument" (1969), followed by a separate book (Children's Literature, 1972) and a sequel "The Chest in which something knocks" (1976); the parody spy thriller "Gene Green – the Untouchable" (1972), co-written with Grigory Pozhenyan and Ovid Gorchakov. The task of this chapter is to analyze the writings of the author published in the 1970s, avoiding simplistic polarization and removing unnecessary opposition ("netlenka" versus "nuzhnik", censored versus uncensored).

The first part of the second chapter examines **Aksenov's "niche" prose**. Official criticism did not encourage Aksenov even in the early 60s. The titles of the reviews for the novel "Ticket to the Stars" (1961) are self-explanatory: "Fake Ticket", "Star Ticket - But Where?", and many others. After the publication of "Surplussed Barrelware", the writer was accused of "self-centeredness of the character, tendencies towards elitism, ignoring the historical experience of the people" [Lanschikov 1968: 31]. But the position of the unpublished author was new to Aksenov, who was accustomed to all-Union glory. Therefore, in the early 1970s, he developed the poetics of compromise (ambiguity) that had been outlined earlier and sought to carefully integrate into reliable literary niches. There were both well-established and new ones among them [Zholkovsky 1992: 50-53; 2014: 411-437].

**The new "niche": the series "Fiery revolutionaries"** was organized by Politizdat in 1968. As its editor V. G. Novokhatko wrote in his personal diary in 1980, "books about current life in prose are even more disfigured by censorship than ours," which is why allusions to modernity and the "Aesopian language" so often

penetrated into historical narratives of the 70s [Novokhatko 2018: 277]. However, it seems that in the novel about Leonid Krasin "Love of Electricity" (1969), Aksenov does not rely on "Aesopian" techniques so much as he strives to faithfully write the number of pages aforesaid in the contract. As a result, professional historians of the liberal persuasion gently criticized the writer for a lack of research: "It would be possible to create a list of things that the author forgot to include and things that he did not mention" [Loginov 1971: 32], and some professional readers (at that time – secretly) accused him of conjuncture and "handicraft" [Kallass 2002: 54]. The series «Fiery Revolutionaries», although it was under the jurisdiction of *Politizdat* and formally was a tribute to the Soviet system, did not actually fulfill the ideological goals assigned to it. Therefore, it is not surprising that Aksenov, in his book from this series, nevertheless expresses the idea of an artist's right to independent work.

From the usual range of genre options available to the "challenging" writer, Aksenov selected several: the film industry ("he wrote screenplay proposals and received advance payments; this was a common practice at the time" [Sidorov 2012: 193]), translations and **a traditional "niche" – children's literature**. In the field of children's literature during the "thaw" period, more or less liberal-minded magazines began to emerge. Thus, the Leningrad "Bonfire", as reported by its long-term employee, "was notable for the fact that it allowed itself to do something bold, despite all the difficult times" [Makhotin 2013: 175]. It was in this magazine that the story about the "Leningrad pioneer Gennady Stratofontov" was published [Aksenov 1970: 38].

The fabulous Soviet reality, its inhabitants and heirs – children – found true opponents only in the West: but the overseas source of villains was inexhaustible. It would seem that Aksenov reproduces this "ideological form" [Yurchak 2014: 16]: in children's stories, all the villains have clearly foreign names – Madame Nakamura-Branchevskaya, the healthy fellow Bastardo Miserables, the "lumpish Mr. Lattifudo", the multimillionaire Siracuzers and many others. In fact, the pioneer superhero manages to win in both books only thanks to his involvement in the international and, more specifically, the Western context. Thus, reproducing the

external genre form (the struggle of the ideal character against the threat from the West), Aksenov transforms its meaning beyond recognition in a specific context. Alexey Yurchak defined this phenomenon by the concept of *a performative shift* [Yurchak 2014: 25]. Aksenov's "perfect person" is impossible to imagine without openness to the outside world ("using his excellent English, Gennady maintained constant correspondence with boys from Great Britain, Nigeria, New Zealand, Tanganyika...") and without interest in foreign languages, including exotic ones ("it seems to me that I am beginning, Nikolai, to understand the Empyrean language" [Aksenov 1970: 29]).

Simultaneously with the story for the "Bonfire", Aksenov, in collaboration with Grigory Pozhenyan and Ovid Gorchakov, writes a **Disloyal parody on a spy novel "Gene Green – the Untouchable"** (first published in 1972). The genre becomes the object of parody once again, but this time – not Soviet, but Western literature. Ian Fleming's "Bondiana" appears in the work of Grivady Gorpozhaks (the joint pseudonym of the co-authors) both in the form of direct quotes and as the favorite reading of the main character, Gene Green. It is also present at the level of plot movements and stylistics. The choice of the parodied genre was "disloyal": books about the fictional secret agent James Bond were a "sweet forbidden fruit" in the Soviet Union, and were only available through self-publishing channels. The official view on Fleming's writing and film adaptations, and in general on the detective-spy genre, was contemptuously critical: "An uncaring murderer and rapist who protects the interests of the property-owning class is the beloved hero of bourgeois society in the second half of the twentieth century" [Cit. by: Osipov 2018: 27].

The reasons why Aksenov, precisely in the early 1970s, enthusiastically joined the game of writing in the detective-spy genre, according to the philologist G. Khazagerov, were prompted by the era itself. This era pushed the writer to explore both duality and parody in his work. "The reasons for creating a false identity were different, but the love for the false identities was almost universal. The favorite movie is "Seventeen Moments of Spring", where our soviet man disguises himself

in a fascist uniform" [Khazagerov 1998]. A rather serious problem of preserving the true essence, characteristic of the era of "stagnation", is acquiring ironic and playful overtones.

The second part of the second chapter is called **The Paradoxes of censorship: the prohibition of "Our Golden Hardware" and the publication of "Search of a Genre"**. It examines two novels by Aksenov, created with the expectation of a censored publication. "Our Golden Hardware" was never published before the writer emigrated from the USSR, and "Search for a Genre", after the refusals of several publishing houses, was miraculously published in the "New World" magazine.

Unsatisfied with the "marginal" position in literature, Aksenov decides to take a risky step disguised as a compromise – he writes the novel **"Our Golden Hardware" (1973)**, filling the loyal genre of the Soviet production novel with free (self-willed, nostalgic for the sixties and – implicitly – for the central position in the literary field) content. Here, perhaps for the first time, self-censorship was not enough. In the last stages of editing, the novel, which the author considered to be a publishable version of "The Burn", was banned by the editor. The decision to publish or not to publish a text depended not only on its aesthetic and even ideological qualities, but also on the reputation of the author and his personal relationships with the editorial board. Internal editorial alignments, in which "human" factors played a significant role, also influenced this decision. To a large extent, the verdict of the highest ideological superiors, such as propaganda and culture departments of the Central Committee of the CPSU, determined whether a text would be published or not.

The failure of the publication of "Our Golden Hardware" still raises questions from researchers, because it actually happened at the final stage of the journal's work with the manuscript. However, the editing by Boris Polevoy, who replaced Valentin Kataev as editor-in-chief of *Yunost*, was so offensive that Aksenov was forced to respond to it with a strongly worded letter: "I hate to tell you, but this editing, which looks like a pogrom in a china shop, is just boondoggle. Perhaps the only point would be to leave this painty manuscript as a museum showpiece for the edification of

posterity: "that's how they edited the lyrics in the old days" [Aksenov 2015: 407]. According to our hypothesis, one of the probable reasons for the ban was the too sincere and explicit apologetics of the Thaw, which seemed inappropriate and harmful to the ideological curators of literature.

After losing a stable literary position, the writer continues to *search*, which becomes a central theme in Aksenov's writings of the 1970s. In the preface to "Our Golden Hardware" for *Yunost* magazine, Aksenov predicts for himself and his characters "years of hard work, continuing the search and a new search" [Aksenov 2008: 6]. The search for "genre" became the main theme and title of the novel, which in the first publication in the "New World" magazine was additionally accompanied by an emphatic genre definition – "**Search of a Genre**". Pavel Durov is looking for a "genre", Dr. Malcolmov is looking for Lymph-D ("The Burn"), scientists are looking for a particle of Double-phew ("Our Golden Hardware"), and the writer is looking for a compromise with the system and with himself.

The novel "Search of a Genre" was not well received by its publishers or critics, and it also failed to appeal to readers. The then editor-in-chief of the *New World* magazine, S. Narovchatov, published the novel not without hesitation and wrote in a personal letter that he would probably print Aksenov's "next nonsense" in a year [Samoylov 2020: 183]. Critics also gave the novel an unkind review (see, for instance, [Anninsky 1978: 45]). Even loyal and attentive readers, including literary colleagues such as Alexander Kabakov and Evgeny Popov, who have dubbed themselves "Podaksenoviki", consider "Search of a Genre" to be far from their friend's and literary mentor's most significant and powerful work. In this paragraph of the dissertation, we not only briefly consider the difficult history of the publication of the novel, but we also analyze it as one of Aksenov's three travelogues from the 1970s: "Surplussed Barrelware", "Round the clock Non-stop" and "Search of a Genre".

From what is stated in the Second Chapter we draw **the following conclusions**: Aksenov's travelogues are a description of a journey into the whirlwind that for a decade (1968-1978) took the writer further and further away from the

official Soviet literature. "Surplussed Barrelware" led away from the socialist realism of the debut novels, "Round the Clock Non-stop" – finally – from ideological loyalty, and the "Search of a Genre" ended in conflict, both aesthetically and personally<sup>2</sup>.

Aksenov, used to the relative well-being of the 1960s, does not dare to make open gestures breaking with Soviet literature. On the contrary, in the late 60s and 70s, he hopes for a compromise. Working on a biased book for *Politizdat*, trying his hand at stories for children, Aksenov continues to send his original texts to publishers. The fate of "Our Golden Hardware" awaited most of them. "Search of a Genre" in fact caused a quarrel between the author and the editorial board of the *New World* magazine. This was Aksenov's last major published work in the USSR before his emigration.

**Chapter Three. The Dream of Convergence: America in Aksenov's Texts of the Mid-1970s.** The writer, having previously admired America and Western civilization with its jazz, branded clothing, abundance of food and freedom of speech, by the mid-1970s began to view the United States from a more practical perspective. The writer is possessed by the dream of bringing Soviet and American cultures closer to each other. We examine Aksenov's "westernization" in the mid-70s using the example of his translation of E.L. Doctorow's novel "Ragtime" and travel essays "Round the Clock Non-stop".

Being in a situation of a "fake writer's block" (Aksenov's self-commentary from 1977 [Aksenov 2015: 329]), the writer also turns to translation, but this leads to results significant for his own literary evolution. We consider them in the first paragraph of the Third Chapter called **"Ragtime" with jazz variations.**

Aksenov does not begin his translation career with *Ragtime*, but continues his writing career by adapting the text by Doctorow to his own goals. The main goal in

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<sup>2</sup> The irritation of the editorial staff of «New World» and Aksenov was mutual, as can be seen from the interview of Perestroika time: "I went into a terrible rage, called a representative of the *Voice of America* and gave an interview. I said that I was already tired of all this and if they didn't restore [to the issue of the magazine] "Search of a Genre," I would make the appropriate decision" [Pugach 1989: 82].



the “deaf” 70s was to express himself. Edgar Lawrence Doctorow's text can be considered as a theme for Aksenov's diverse stylistic variations. In the case of both writers, the use of musical metaphor is not simply a matter of empty words. The ragtime genre, which flourished in the early decades of the 20th century, serves as the compositional and thematic basis for this novel with its deliberately ambiguous title. The title refers to both the musical style of ragtime and the era associated with this style (the literal meaning of the words "rag time" is a “ragged” or “fragmentary” time).

Aksenov's commitment to Americanisms and "untranslated" words are explained not only by possible ignorance of translation etiquette, but also have deeper roots that go back to the writer's ever-present dream of convergence between the United States and the USSR, if not in a strictly political sense, then at least in a literary one. In the 1970s, these dreams, oddly to say, did not seem impossible: both personally for Aksenov, who miraculously went to the University of California in 1975 to lecture on Russian literature, and for Soviet writers in general. In the summer of 1977, in Moscow, despite all obstacles, a meeting of Soviet and American writers was organized by the editorial board of the journal "Foreign Literature"<sup>3</sup> — the "détente" was felt in the literary field.

It would be unfair to say that having expressed himself enough in translation, Aksenov remained deaf to the originality of Doctorow's novel. On the contrary, the writer heard the music of the rag-time composition so well that he reproduced its principles in his own *opus magnum* — "The Burn". And this is not the only **Lesson of "Ragtime"**, to which the last paragraph of the first part of the Third Chapter is devoted. It was in the mid-1970s that Aksenov began working on *Ragtime* and his works started to move away from linear composition and the step-by-step development of the plot. In "The Burn", which was being worked on simultaneously with the translation, Aksenov prefers the linearity to the technique of (motion pictures) montage, the direct chronology of the main storyline — to the alternation

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<sup>3</sup> Documents on the organization and holding of the seminar of Soviet and American writers // RGALI F. 1573. Op. 5. Ed. hr. 1145.

of several main themes with their countless variations.

In the second part of the Third Chapter, we focused on American essays **"Round the Clock Non-stop. Impressions, reflections, adventures" (1976)**. The travelogue as a genre combines the elements of authenticity and fiction. On the one hand, it offers an artistic narrative. On the other hand, it aims to document the journey in great detail. This genre allows for a sense of ambivalence, as it combines these two elements. Aksenov's strategy in "Round the Clock Non-stop" contains a contradiction. The degrees of fiction are delimited as explicitly as possible – at the compositional level — by alternating conventionally documentary chapters with titles and fantasy chapters numbered and united by the common title "Typical American Adventure". It would seem that the author takes care not to mislead the reader about the authenticity of a particular travelogue page. However, a lot of self-descriptions scattered throughout the text persistently convince the opposite. At first, gently and interrogatingly: imagination and reality — "are these concepts in such a terrible contradiction?" [Aksenov 1976: 56], then affirmatively: "The artist's fantasy is also reality" [Aksenov 1976: 67]. Dear Aksenov, the idea that freedom of artistic imagination does not contradict "realism" managed to appear in the Soviet press: "Well, what are the objects and phenomena surrounding us? It's all very incomprehensible, mysterious and strange. Well, let's say the rustle of leaves, the flow of the river, sunrise and sunset <...>. After all, because we have labeled these phenomena in some simple words, they have not become less mysterious" [Aksenov and Roslyakov 1974: 6]. There is another aspect to this idea: a reluctance to break away from official Soviet literature, rather than a desire to simply diversify and liberate it.

**Conclusions** based on what is described in the Third Chapter. The musical form (as well as the assembly montage of the parts that form the whole) becomes a conduit for nostalgia — for history, for the era of ragtime — filled with associations already modern to the author [Ostendorf 1991: 585]. Apparently, Aksenov appreciated Doctorow's compositional decision for this very reason: the heart of "The Burn" lies in a painful and at times bittersweet nostalgia for the "golden age"

of Soviet underground jazz, as well as for the illusions of the "Sixtiers".

The optimistic view of America, as presented in the "Round-the-Clock Non-Stop", is not so much connected with an idealization of the United States as it is with the unique perspective that totalitarian states can create among their citizens. American indifference may seem like genuine freedom to those who live in these countries: "Residents of "totalitarian" states <...> often dream about things like fashion, models, idols, image games, freedom of movement, advertising, rampant advertising" [Baudrillard 2000: 175]. Thus, Aksenov, in the mid-1970s, dreamed of the rapprochement between the two "superpowers" and looked across the ocean from a Soviet perspective. Already in the second half of the decade, Aksenov will seriously think about emigrating to the United States.

#### **Chapter Four. The "American Dream": Going Beyond the Soviet Literary Field**

Aksenov's internal separation from censored Soviet literature occurred gradually and began well before the idea of publishing the uncensored almanac "Metropol" (1979). Aksenov takes the first and most important step on this path a decade earlier, in 1969, starting secret work on the novel "The Burn". Thus, the first opened space outside of Soviet literature was the underground – the writing of a novel in secret, accompanied by the persistent dream that "The Burn" would one day be published, already in the New World.

In the voluminous opening paragraph of Chapter Four **the uncensored novel "The Burn" (1969-1975)** is analyzed from several perspectives simultaneously. Firstly, the autobiographical elements of the novel are explored. In "The Burn", the highly personal plot<sup>4</sup> (the arrest and exile of Aksenov's mother, Evgenia Ginzburg, disguised in the novel by a transparent pseudonym) is consistently accompanied by self-reflection and self-depreciating themes.

The author of "The Burn" establishes an unusually complex relationship with his reflection characters. There are five of them and at the same time this is a single

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<sup>4</sup> "The Burn" is the first, but not the last, literary text by Aksenov, which comprehends his youth and the fate of his mother.

character (the Second Book of "The Burn" bears the symbolic title "Five in Solitary Confinement"). Saxophonist Samson Sabler, scientist Aristarchus Kunitzer, physician Gennady Malcolmov, sculptor Radiy Khvastischev and writer Panteley Panteley share a common patronymic – Apollinarievich. The protagonists share a common past (Tolya von Steinbock's Magadan youth, to which the Second Book is dedicated) and the future ("The Last Adventure of the Sufferer", Book Three).

Secondly, the relationship between self-deprecating and self-justifying motives is considered in detail. The author and the autobiographical characters in "The Burn" reflect on their own reputational and creative struggles at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. One of the main sources of humiliation for the protagonists is their attempts at compromise and an unjustified hope that "everything is not yet lost" [Aksenov 1999: 450]. The motive of the compromise is connected with the doppelgangers, antagonists, "ex-friends", of which there are also five: Sylvester is opposed to Sabler; Igor Evstigneevich Silver, who turned out to be a snitch, is opposed to Khvastischev; opposed to Kunitzer is Nikodim Vasilyevich Argentov; opposed to Malcolmov is Silberantsev; and opposed to Panteley is Vadim Nikolaevich Serebryakov. Humiliation, fear of uncertainty, and eluding success – these were the feelings that Aksenov experienced at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, and they served as the inspiration for the novel "The Burn". Its author, already in post-Soviet times, called it a "hysterical book", a book of breakdown.

Thirdly, the nonlinear, postmodern, montage narrative of "The Burn" is analyzed not only from a musical point of view (the novel contains structural elements of the jazz form – improvisation, counterpoint, variation), but also using the theory of trauma. The confused, "drunken" nonlinear narrative in "The Burn" is a consequence not only of Aksenov's conscious experiments with the jazz form, but also of his "traumatic life experience", which does not lend itself to a "smooth" verbal embodiment [Ushakin, Trubina (ed.) 2009: 110]. The grown-up and divided Apollinarievichi never recovered from the Magadan "burn" - a trauma embodied in the novel very canonically: "As the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in

repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena " [Caruth 1996: 91].

In the Fourth Chapter, we come to **conclusions**: The grotesque in Aksenov's "The Burn", according to the researchers, "became a form of overcoming and at the same time paradoxical, rather bitter and non-illusory, development of the romantic utopianism of the 'confessional' prose of the 1960s" [Leiderman and Lipovetsky 2003: 148]. In the uncensored novel, confessional is reinterpreted and serves to create an automyph in which the spiritual and bodily (self)exposure turns into self-justification.

The novel, which tells the story of the defeat of its autobiographical protagonist (from the perspective of the plot, the Apollinariievichi lose to their more adaptable antagonists), becomes a creative triumph for the author, who was once dismissed as a writer of "youthful themes" who had run out of ideas. "At that time, it was the years of the most intense work" [Glad 1997]. With an apparent defeat in the Soviet literary field (the "Thaw" positions are lost, access to the reader is blocked, talent is traded for literary tinkering...), a different kind of victory is achieved: "The victory of your life and your wonderful talent, and the victory of those who were murdered over their murderers," as Bella Akhmadulina, a poet and friend of Aksenov, described "The Burn" [Aksenov 2015: 186].

### **The main arguments of the dissertation to be defended**

1. Aksenov's ambiguous ambivalent literary position in the 1970s was greatly influenced by the position of the official Soviet Sixtier, which he held during the "Thaw". On the one hand, Aksenov found the transition to "stagnation" and the change in literary policy<sup>5</sup> to be painful, as it became alien to him. On the other hand, he sought, as far as possible, to maintain a comfortable lifestyle as a Soviet writer.

2. In the 1970s, Aksenov shifted from the center of the literary field to its periphery both for political reasons he signs letters in support of political prisoners,

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<sup>5</sup> The essence of these changes has been formulated, for example, by the official literary critic Yuri Zhukov. He quotes the resolution of the 24th Congress of the Central Committee of the CPSU in 1971, adding on his own: "Our culture is not a sanctuary for experimenters".

openly criticizes the invasion into Czechoslovakia) and for aesthetic reasons (Aksenov's increasingly surrealistic and modernist style caused rejection from the Soviet literary authorities). This leads to the development of the previously outlined poetics of compromise (ambiguity), which either way manifests itself throughout the corpus of the writer's works from the "stagnant" period.

3. Ambivalence is manifested even in Aksenov's "niche" prose, trying, on the one hand, not to lose the status of a published Soviet writer, on the other hand, to remain free from ideological pressure at least at the stylistics. Double addressing in children's novels, "Aesop's language" and an allusive plan in the novel "Love of Electricity", a game parody in "Gene Green – the Untouchable" still did not allow the writer to speak out to the end. However, these texts can be considered as a creative laboratory for a synchronously written "free book" – "The Burn".

4. In the "stagnant" period, censorship policy also becomes more complicated, which has different consequences for Aksenov's work. On the one hand, his harmless nostalgic novel about the sixties, "Our Golden Hardware", is not allowed to be printed. On the other hand, the newspapers publish fragments from the same "Our Golden Hardware", from "Search of a Genre", which barely made their way to print, as well as the story "Rendezvous", in which Aksenov implicitly pronounces ideas from the uncensored "The Burn". Thus, Aksenov's attempt to find a compromise with the system faces a new obstacle and continues to be unsuccessful.

5. The translation of E.L. Doctorow's novel "Ragtime" seems to be attributed to Aksenov's "niche" prose, which was created to survive in the increasingly challenging literary environment of the 1970s. However, the liberties taken by the translator turned Doctorow's book, which was critical of America, into a work by Aksenov, where the American theme was not only a source for stylistic variation, but also a reflection of the writer's dream of cultural convergence between the USSR and the USA.

6. The work on the translation of "Ragtime", "syncopating and collage", probably suggested to Aksenov the musical basis for the composition of "The Burn". Thus, in the writer's literary evolution, in which, according to his later conviction,

there was "nothing personal" [Aksenov 2002: 178], the "general process" of musical history was reflected: «ragtime began to approach a jazz feeling» [From Piano Thumping 1973: 54].

7. In parallel with the texts intended for publication, Aksenov is also working on an unpublishable manuscript titled "The Burn". One of the main tasks (albeit not explicitly stated) of the author is to create his own automyph, explaining and justifying to the Soviet and Western reader (Aksenov initially hoped to publish "The Burn" and "The Island of Crimea" abroad) his strategy of compromise, which he recognized as humiliating. Ruthless autobiography (for instance, Pantelei Pantelei, the writer's alter ego, who is "winking at the authorities" [Nemzer 1991: 247] and sluttish Alice Fokusova, a faithless wife and mistress of many high- and not very "high-ranking scum" [Aksenov 1999: 410], a prototype of which is Aksenov's future wife, Maya Carmen) gives him the moral right to speak openly about the abominations and charms of the era. The self-accusing intonation of "The Burn" turns into self-justification, and defeat turns into victory. Aksenov's departure from Soviet literature and into the underground marked the first step towards his eventual emigration.

The results of the research have **theoretical significance**: this study reveals the main stages of V.P. Aksenov's wrining development in the 1970s in relation to the changing socio-cultural context of the Brezhnev era. The paper formulates and analyzes the basic principles of the poetics of compromise (ambiguity), which either way manifests itself throughout the corpus of the writer's works from the "stagnant" period. Studying the dynamic and ambiguous literary position of V.P. Aksenov during the "stagnation" years allows us to take a fresh perspective on the structure of late Soviet literature.

**The practical significance** of the research results lies in its potential to inform and enhance educational courses in various philological disciplines, such as the history of Russian literature in the second half of the 20th century, the history of underground Soviet literature during the same period, and the cultural history of late Soviet society. In addition, the materials from the research can be used as a valuable

resource for the historical and literary commenting on the works of V.P. Aksenov and other writers from the 1970s.

### **Evaluation of results of the research**

#### **Conferences**

2024, May 16-18 – report "Mourning the lost sixties: The Thaw in the texts of Vasily Aksenov in the 1970s" at the International Scientific Conference "Thaw as a phenomenon", HSE, Nizhny Novgorod

2023, April 10-21 – report "E.L. Doctorow's novel "Ragtime" translated by Vasily Aksenov" at the XXX International Conference of Students, graduate students and young scientists of Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow

2022, November 10-11 – report "Ragtime with jazz variations: a novel by E.L. Doctorow translated by Vasily Aksenov" at the I International Baltic Seminar of Young Philologists at the University of Latvia, Riga

2021, July 6-11 – report "In Search of a Genre: V.P. Aksenov's literary position in the 1970s" at the XVIII International Summer School on Russian Literature, St. Petersburg, Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Pushkin House)

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