A Dystopian Tale of Russia’s Future

By STEPHEN KOTKIN

DAY OF THE OPRICHNIK

By Vladimir Sorokin
Translated by Jamey Gambrell

Russia’s future is medieval.

A day in that near future, as imagined in “Day of the Oprichnik,” by the bad-boy novelist Vladimir Sorokin, opens with “always the same dream” of a white stallion, “the stallion of all stallions, dazzling, a sorcerer,” a dream that’s ever receding. This vision is interrupted by a whip cracking — in fact the ring of a “mobilov,” or mobile phone with holographs. (We later learn the year is 2028.) Andrei Danilovich Komiaga, our protagonist, snaps a fresh dog’s head onto the hood of his red “Mercedov” and is off on state business: putting down “sedition,” enriching himself and getting high.

Russia’s monarchy has been restored. And thanks be to God! Flogging is back, and the Kremlin has been repainted its original white. Sublime national self-isolation has been rediscovered: a Great Wall of Russia extends from Europe through the Caucasus to the edge of China. The Red Troubles are long past. The White Troubles, which followed the collapse of the Reds, are a memory, too. It is a purer Ivan-the-Terrible age of pillaging and flag waving.

Enforcers like Andrei Danilovich, known as oprichniks — their name back in the days of Ivan — wear long, narrow beards and caftans while carrying ray guns. Their searcher-gadgets locate even well-concealed enemies of state, but their language is beautifully archaic, punctuated with incantations (“Hail the Purge!”) and aphorisms (“A sly approach is needed to run state affairs”).
The day’s first order of business entails the expropriation and execution of a rich noble (“Woe to this house!”). In strict order of rank, the oprichniki also gang-rape the noble’s delicate wife. (“Without this work, araid is like a stallion without a rider.”) The noble’s children are sent to an orphanage to be raised as “honest citizens.” The Russian state is sacred. Cruelty is an art. And the day has only begun.

“Day of the Oprichnik” comes across almost as extended performance art in its evocative rituals and bizarreness. A Siberian soothsayer predicts that the country will be “all right” while tossing Russian literary classics (still printed on paper) into a fire. The half-Jewish czarina, who sleeps during the day and breakfasts at night — offering vodka, beluga caviar, Japanese soba on ice — poses a threat to the state because of her unpopularity, but up close her royal breasts mesmerize.

The oprichniki are not in on any joke, however. And they have power.

Sorokin was born in 1955 in a small town outside Moscow. His father was a professor of metallurgy, and he himself graduated from the Moscow Institute of Oil and Gas. But he forsook a career in hydrocarbons for book illustration and conceptual art. He came of age when the absurdity of Brezhnev’s comatose Soviet superpower trumped satire, and Gorbachev’s garrulous perestroika re-energized the system into the grave. Then life became only more surreal, as Soviet DNA was recombined with the criminality and tiger-skin kitsch of the New Russia. All that is no simple assignment for a satirist, particularly one working within an acclaimed lineage, from Gogol’s “Dead Souls” to Bulgakov’s “Master and Margarita.”

A prolific author of stories, novels, plays and movie scripts, Sorokin commenced writing under Soviet censorship — winks and nods, breached taboos, underground circulation. His novel “The Queue” was published not at home but in the West, in 1985. It consists entirely of sounds and dialogue from people performing the quintessential Soviet act: joining a long line to buy something, without knowing what.

Then poof — censorship was gone. Sorokin experimented further with postmodern form as well as porn, the craze of the liberated 1990s. He
shares the same predicament as other talented Russian farceur-surrealists, like the Victors, Pelevin and Erofeyev: in their virtuoso burlesques about a crashed Russia, there’s often not much to be redeemed.

By now, Sorokin’s cumulative literary grotesquerie — butcherings and bodily fluids, sadomasochism and cannibalism — has pushed every traditional Russian button. (Did I mention that he has illustrated a book of short texts with photographs of the conceptual artist Oleg Kulik having sex with farm animals?) A few years ago, the Putin Youth hurled his books into a mock toilet, affording him a level of dissident notoriety. And yet, subversive works in Russia today are essentially impossible. Provocative fiction no longer produces consequences.

Except for commercial sales and book awards: in 2001, Sorokin won the so-called People’s Booker Prize and the Andrei Bely prize for contributions to literature. Also appearing in English translation now is Sorokin’s 700-page ICE TRILOGY (New York Review Books, paper, $19.95), a science fiction epic in which a meteorite strikes Siberia, creating a blond, blue-eyed master fraternity whom no one could love but themselves. Might this be something of a Sorokin moment in the Anglophone world? Is the pope German?

Sorokin’s pyrotechnics are often craftily twinned with Soviet-era references and conventions. The title and 24-hour frame of “Day of the Oprichnik” shout to mind Solzhenitsyn’s “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich” (1962), an exposé of a Gulag camp that depicts an Everyman-victim who finds dignity in labor, almost like a Socialist Realist hero. But whereas Solzhenitsyn’s masterpiece unintentionally demonstrated the deep impact that Soviet tropes had had on its author, Sorokin’s comic turn deliberately shows how Soviet and even Old Muscovy mentalities persist.

In “Oprichnik,” the playful antique terms and gestures have sometimes confounded the not-to-be-envied translator. Ivan the Terrible’s short-lived oprichnina (literally, “the place apart”) was separated in 1565 from the boyar lands, known as the zemshchina, here mistranslated as Zemstvo, a late-19th-century form of local self-government. Nor were the oprichniks doing “government work,” as translated, but rather acting as a Praetorian
Guard of the sovereign, often against the government.

So it is in Putin’s Russia, where a gang of police officials, the siloviki, lord over not just the richest private citizens but also other parts of the state. Sorokin’s imaginative diagnosis of Putinism further grasps that the officials’ looting is driven not by profiteering alone, but by their conviction that they are defending Russian interests. Everything Sorokin’s oprichnicks do is a transaction, but their love of country runs deep. They may give in to temptation and tune in to foreign radio (“enemy voices”), but these moments of weakness vitiate neither their pride in their work nor their code of honor. They have ideals.

Over the course of Andrei Danilovich’s day, he supervises a cultural production to ensure its patriotism; injects hallucinogenic fish into his veins; and oversees a scheme through which Chinese merchants shipping goods to Europe via Russia are compelled to buy “insurance” from the oprichnicks. It turns out the Chinese manufacture everything the Russians use, including those Mercedovs. (“We make children on Chinese beds!” “We do our business on Chinese toilets!”)

Almost no female characters appear, except as rape victims or entertainers. The oprichnicks are truly a brotherhood, as captured in the book’s inevitable yet ingeniously wrought climax.

Before dawn breaks, Andrei Danilovich’s driver delivers him home, barely conscious. Smelling salts are applied. Prideful Russia, we have come to see, is actually a wound, an “insulted and injured country.” “My white stallion, wait,” the oprichnik sputters. “Don’t run away. . . . where are you going.”

Stephen Kotkin, a professor of history at Princeton, is writing a new book, “Stalin’s World.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 10, 2011

A review on March 13 about “Day of the Oprichnik,” by the provocative Russian novelist Vladimir Sorokin, referred incorrectly to a collection of his writings that are accompanied by a series of photographs depicting bestiality. The writings, in the book “Deep Into Russia,” are short texts in a
variety of Russian literary and linguistic styles — not all of them are poems, and they do not “glorify the motherland.”

The review also erroneously identified Sorokin himself as the man in the photographs — it was in fact his collaborator in the project, the conceptual artist Oleg Kulik.