

A Private Hero for a Privatized Country

By Leon Aron

The most interesting phenomenon on Russia's literary scene today is the popularity of the Erast Fandorin mysteries by Grigoriy Shalvovich Chkhartishvili, who writes as Boris Akunin.

Although the books are expensive by Russian standards at an equivalent of almost \$3 for a copy, series sales skyrocketed from 50,000 in 1999 to 3 million in 2001.¹ In July 2000, 200,000 copies of the latest two books sold in one week; by early August the two volumes were in the third printing.² By the end of 2000 Chkhartishvili had become "Russia's most widely read contemporary writer."³

Russian television launched a series based on the first book of the Fandorin cycle, *Azazel*, in March 2002. Two months later a Moscow theater staged a play based on the same book. Several books in the series have been translated into German, Japanese, French, and Italian. Paul Verhoeven, who directed the Hollywood action blockbusters *Basic Instinct* and *Total Recall*, is reportedly turning *Azazel* into a movie for international distribution,⁴ and the Oscar-winning (*Burned by the Sun*) Russian director Nikita Mikhalkov is said to be contemplating a film based on the books.⁵ Websites devoted to the Chkhartishvili oeuvre include two set up by fans (www.fandorin.ru and www.erastomania.narod.ru) and the author's official publicity site (www.akunin.ru).

Yet none of Chkhartishvili's books contains the ingredients commonly associated with success in a new postauthoritarian postcensorship market. They lack formerly forbidden fruit assumed to be irresistible to the newly liberated literary

market: there is little sex (and its brief descriptions are positively Victorian); fights, while brutal and explicitly portrayed, are infrequent; the language is not just clean but pristinely old-fashioned.

In the absence of pat explanations, the success of the Fandorin mysteries may signal momentous developments in Russian culture and society as the nation enters its second post-Soviet decade.

A Delightful Read

Strategically positioned inside the cover of every Fandorin book are several pages of rave reviews from leading Russian periodicals, which extol the series for the "hard-boiled," "clever," "paradox-ridden," and "intricate" plots; the "brilliant" and "very fine" stylization; and the "meticulous" language exuding the "mouth-watering aroma of great Russian literature." "Beautiful, clever, classy," one reviewer concluded.⁶

Few readers will find the critics' praise extravagant. The texts *are* delicious: an absorbing and utterly enjoyable read, briskly narrated and brimming with the authenticity of language and detail, verve, irony, and elegance. The language is crafted carefully and tastefully after the classic nineteenth-century Russian prose of Nikolai Leskov, Ivan Goncharov, and Sergei Aksakov with echoes of Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Shown through the eyes of a young orphaned boy in *Lyubovnik Smerti* (Death's lover), the Moscow *dno* (bottom) district Khitrovka—with its thieves, gangsters (*fartovye*), prostitutes, and their masterfully resurrected century-old lingo—recalls *Oliver Twist* in sadness and gentle humor. The author dedicates every Fandorin book "to the Nineteenth

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Century, when literature was great, the belief in progress boundless, and crimes were committed and solved with elegance and taste.”

In the expertly paced, suspenseful yet plausible tales, the very likable hero begins by investigating murders (or suicides) and soon finds himself battling homicidal maniacs and sadists, a master spy, a world-renowned hired killer, Russian leftist terrorists (expertly modeled on the Socialist Revolutionaries), or a gang of international criminals who kidnap a young grand duke on the eve of the coronation of Russia’s last tsar, Nicholas II. Along the way Fandorin becomes involved in grand diplomatic games and the intrigues of the tsarist court.

Chkhartishvili thinks his books “a cocktail, with Dostoevsky’s language, a splash of Umberto Eco, and plots along the line of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day*.”⁷ He aims to bridge the gap “between literature that soars and literature that is in the gutter.”⁸ “Russia never had commercial literature for the middle classes—partly because it never had a middle class,” Chkhartishvili told an interviewer. “We either had pulp fiction, that intellectuals were embarrassed to read or high-brow literature.”⁹

The Hegelian Triad

The process that brought the Akunin books to the top of the Russian literary market may be described in terms of the Hegelian dialectic familiar to college-educated Russians (older than forty) from the compulsory courses in Marxism. First was the thesis: the increasingly stale classic canon on the one hand and propaganda trash on the other, both protected by censorship from competition or innovation. Then came the antithesis, a headlong plunge into a vat of forbidden fruit: the rediscovery of the banned serious writers and essayists (in Russia the list, dating from 1918, was very long) during Gorbachev’s glasnost (1988–1990), followed by a quick descent into trash, typical of all fledgling postauthoritarian cultures. The synthesis occurred when the previously discarded national classic tradition had been retrieved, revived, and recast by an infusion of irreverence, experimentation, and occasional subversion.

The success of the Akunin books proves the growing cultural presence of the post-Soviet middle class, which has the taste to appreciate the new literature—and the

money to pay for it. In the words of a Russian literary critic, “It’s like the Klondike. Chkhartishvili discovered a huge hunger for good popular literature, and it’s now bad taste to read trash.”^{10*} Following Akunin’s success, Russia’s biggest commercial publishers, AST, Eksmo, and Olma—all privately owned—began supplementing thrillers and romances with serious fiction by new Russian authors.¹¹ “We realized we’d been ignoring a huge section of the reading public,” a spokesman for one publishing house admitted. “People have had their fill of potboilers; they want serious literature.”¹²

The Hero

In keeping with the genre, the Akunin books owe much of their appeal to the hero, the master sleuth. Orphaned at nineteen when his father, a bankrupt nobleman, died, Fandorin is a descendant of German knights, crusaders, and soldiers of fortune, one of whom, by the name of Von Dorn, came to Russia in the seventeenth century and became the captain of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich’s palace guards. (Every one of those details is important, for sooner or later the author puts all of them to work.)

Again as befits the canon, Fandorin is intelligent, hard-working, and fearless. A fitness enthusiast, he daily practices Japanese martial arts, which get him out of many tight corners. (Mirroring the lifelong hobby—judo—of the country’s widely popular and youthful president does not hurt sales.)

A tall, broad-shouldered, trim brunet with bright blue eyes and a neat moustache, Fandorin dresses impeccably and looks like “a model in the latest Paris fashion magazine” in perfectly tailored coats and snow-white collars and cuffs. Unless working undercover, he is never without gloves, top hat, and elegant walking stick, which naturally conceals a razor-sharp blade.

The finishing touch is his gray temples, incongruous because of the youth and vigor that the rest of his body signals, even as we see him approach and pass the forty-year mark. They invariably pique women’s curiosity and pity—a combination that proves fatal to many female hearts. The grayness is the result of a personal tragedy at

* Chkhartishvili is not the first writer benefiting from the trend. A fusion of classic tradition and postmodernist form characterizes the works by Mikhail Butov, Ergaliy Ger, Dmitriy Lipskerov, Vladimir Makanin, and Viktor Pelevin.

the end of the first book. Losing his bride to a terrorist bombing makes Fandorin a confirmed bachelor and thus opens the narratives to all manner of sidelines and subplots to enliven the mysteries with the hero's intense but almost always chaste relationships with willful, independent, strong, intelligent, and feminist-minded beautiful young women.

In the sleuthing pantheon, Fandorin most closely resembles Lord Peter Wimsey, Dorothy Sayers's athletic, smart, and charming aristocratic playboy (like Fandorin, a car enthusiast)—at least until he renounces bachelorhood by marrying Harriet Vane. Chkhartishvili wants Hugh Grant to play his hero.

Existential Choices of the 1880s and 2002

Yet there is far more to Fandorin's appeal than his shrewdness, courage, and good looks. In Chkhartishvili's intricate narratives, multilayered and chockfull of allusions, the hero's attractiveness to the Russian reader is likely to be magnified by the era in which the author placed him.

Chkhartishvili is precise about the timing. Born on January 8, 1856, Fandorin investigates his first case in 1876 and the most recent one in 1900. The hero comes

of age and lives his adult life in the immediate aftermath of Russia's first (and until Gorbachev only) great liberal revolution from above, which began with the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and ended with the murder of the revolution's engineer, Tsar Alexander II, by leftist terrorists on March 1, 1881. A conservative retrenchment ensued under his successors, Alexander III and Nicholas II.

In addition to liberation of the serfs, Alexander II's reforms included radical decentralization and local self-government by elected representatives; abolition or curtailment of exclusive privileges; courts "in which all the subjects were equal"¹³ before the law, trials by jury in capital cases, and a competitive judicial process, in which the defense (*advokaty*) freely vied with state prosecutors for juries' votes (which, among other marvels, resulted in a nonguilty verdict for the female assassin of the head of the Russian secret police); huge increases in the number of primary schools, funded and run by local authorities and open to children of all social and ethnic origins; higher education for women and Jews; and growing autonomy and self-government of universities.

Gains in personal freedom included the ability to leave the country and to return. Newspaper, magazine, and book publishers were freed from prepublication censorship, and Russian periodicals and books of the last

Books by Grigoriy Chkhartishvili (Boris Akunin)

(arranged by year of publication and in the Erast Fandorin series by events described in the book)

The Erast Fandorin series

Azazel, 1998 (1876)
Turketskiiy gambit (The Turkish gambit), 1998 (1877)
Leviafan (The Leviathan), 1998 (1878)
Smert' Akhillesa (The death of Achilles), 1999 (1882)
Osobyie porucheniya (Special assignments), 1999
(1886 and 1889)
Statskiy sovetnik (State councilor), 2000 (1891)
Koronatsiya (The coronation), 2000 (1896)
Lyubovnik smerti (Death's lover), 2001 (1900)
Lyubovnitsa smerti (Death's mistress), 2001 (1900)

The Pelagiya series

Pelagiya i belyi bul'dog (Pelagiya and the white bulldog), 2001
Pelagiya i chyorniy monakh (Pelagiya and the black monk), 2001

The Adventures of the Master of Arts series

Altyn-Tolobas, 2001
Vneklassnoe chtenie (Individual reading), 2002
Chayka (Seagull) (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2001)
Skazki dlya idiotov (Fairy tales for idiots) (Moscow: Olma-Press, 2002)

The books in the Fandorin series have been published by Zakharov (Moscow), e-mail: zakharov@dataforce.net.

The publisher of the Pelagiya series is Astrel (Moscow and St. Petersburg), whose website address is www.astr.ru.

The Master of Arts series has been issued by the Olma-Press (Moscow) and Neva (St. Petersburg) publishers.

quarter of the nineteenth century were among the most raucously polemical in the world. The number of books printed and sold skyrocketed. Russian culture reached the apogee in the music of Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Petr Tchaikovsky; the stories and novels of Anton Chekhov, Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev; and the theater of Konstanin Stanislavsky.

Following the assassination of the tsar-liberator (who in the days before his death contemplated steps toward a constitutional assembly and eventually a constitutional monarchy), the boundaries of self-government were tightened and political liberties curtailed. The temporary “political stability and normalcy”¹⁴ after the dizzying changes of radical reforms were achieved by “strengthening the supervision and influence of the state over . . . social self-rule and, in general, strengthening and raising the prestige of the top executive authority.”¹⁵ Yet major newspapers continued to be exempt from prepublication censorship,¹⁶ the intense political and social debates went on, and civil society was no longer terrorized into subjugation by the state.

Russian capitalism grew explosively; banks and savings and loan associations mushroomed; foreign investments poured in. The economy expanded rapidly and became one of the world’s fastest-growing. Cities burgeoned, as former serfs became workers at myriad new plants and factories. Thousands of miles of railroads were laid, including the Siberian railroad, which for the first time connected European Russia to the Far East. Large capitalist farms made Russia Europe’s leading exporter of grain.

The nouveau riche’s vulgar display of fortune replaced the discreet enjoyment of wealth practiced by the old nobility and the secretive and tight-fisted merchants (*kuptsy*)—and the equality of poverty and lawlessness suffered by everyone else. Thousands became the victims of crooked banking and stock schemes every day. Part and parcel of the Russian state for centuries, corruption—which invariably attends a transition from a state-dominated economy to an early capitalist system—became brazen.

Inevitably exhaustion and disillusion followed the reforms. The intelligentsia’s bitter and growing disappointment in freedom’s ability to deliver wealth quickly and equitably led to a crisis of liberal ideals and doubts about Russia ever becoming part of what was then called “Europe” (and now the “civilized world”). The collapse of the old ethical order, enforced by state repression,

overlapped with disgust with the new mores and a desperate search for something to replace them both. As Anton Chekhov—whose career coincides with Fandorin’s—observed, “It is as though we were all in love, fell out of love, and now are looking for something new to enchant us.”¹⁷

The parallels with today’s Russia, wearily enjoying a fragile economic and political stabilization after almost a decade of revolutionary turmoil, are obvious. In perhaps the world’s largest in vivo existentialist experiment, the old rules have been swept away, opposition to the regime no longer serves as the sole moral compass, and millions of Russian men and women are attempting to devise and adhere to their own moral codes.

Fandorin speaks to them when he tells another character:

Do you know, Afanasiy Stepanovich, what your mistake is? You believe that the world rests on some rules, that it contains meaning and order. And I have long understood: life is nothing more than chaos. It has no order at all, and no rules. Yes, I do have rules. But those are my own rules, which I made for myself, and not for the world. So let the world be on its own, and I will be on my own. To the extent that I can. Personal rules, Afanasiy Stepanovich, are not a desire to re-arrange the universe, but an attempt to organize, the best one can, the space closest to you. Not beyond that.¹⁸

The Intelligentsia’s Way

Fandorin values the nobility and dignity of daily existence far above distant goals and grandiose feats, hence his fascination with the Path, a teaching of the ancient Chinese philosophy. Explaining his hero’s attachment to the Path, Chkhartishvili said that “the correct path [is] when not the goal is important but the beauty and harmony of the daily existence. If you live right, the goal will be achieved automatically.”¹⁹

The chemical composition of the water in the glass is more important than whether it is half empty or half full. Process is more important than a goal, or, in Sartre’s terms, “existence comes before essence”²⁰—or rather existence becomes essence. Like a true existentialist (and like millions of his compatriots today), Fandorin can count only on himself in deciding how to live—without guidance from above or anyone’s assistance.

Although Chkhartishvili's hero lacks a key attribute of the intelligentsia, university education (he had to drop out of a *gymnasiya*, or classical high school, after his father's bankruptcy and death), he possesses all other formal qualifications of the quintessential pre-1917 *intelligentsia*: a love of reading, self-awareness, an analytical mind, and a keen interest in his country's fate and world affairs. He speaks English, French, German, and Japanese; calms himself with character calligraphy; and can toss out a haiku on a moment's note.

Yet in the privacy of his objectives ("organizing the space closest to you") and even more in the solitude of his *modus operandi* (daily compliance with the self-invented and self-enforced rules of dignified existence), Fandorin's credo differs strikingly from that of the Russian intelligentsia of the past two centuries. To that class, so pivotal to both the best and the worst chapters of Russian history, the state, not the individual, was central. The emergence of Russian secular education coincided with the expansion of the Russian state's reach under Peter the Great to nearly totalitarian proportions. (Every nobleman, for instance, became the state's soldier.) The spawning ground of the intelligentsia—the Russian university—was never independent and private but set up and funded by state. The professors were state employees.

Educated by the state, the intelligentsia was overwhelmingly in the state's employ: in innumerable ministries (some of Russia's greatest poets, Alexander Griboedov, Alexander Pushkin, and Fyodor Tyutchev, all served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), in archives, and, in Soviet Russia, in state-owned "research institutes," as well as in the official "creative unions" of writers, composers, architects, artists, and journalists. What Vladimir Nabokov wrote of Nicholas I, who volunteered to be Pushkin's personal censor, held true for the relationship between the Russian state and the intelligentsia in general: "With striking perseverance he tried to be everything in relations to Russian writers of the time—a father, a godfather, a nurse, a wet nurse, a prison warden, and a literary critic all rolled up in one."²¹ (Nabokov added elsewhere that Nicholas I's "entire reign was not worth a single foot of Pushkin's verse.")²²

Yet the intelligentsia was bound to the Russian state by bonds far stronger than education and employment. For although opposition to and alienation from the state has been the defining feature of the intelligentsia (the term *intelligentsia* itself came into use in the reign of Alexander II), the criticism and resistance—or in the cases of the "early" Alexander II, Gorbachev, or Yeltsin,

brief ardent support—were directed at a particular political regime rather than at the state as the instrument of change, the tool of social, political, and economic engineering. For most of the Russian intelligentsia most of the time, solutions to Russia's ills were state solutions. No national betterment was deemed possible without the state first becoming—in a matter of a few years at the most and by decrees of an enlightened ruler who listens to his intelligentsia advisers—an entirely "European" or "civilized" one.

The obverse of such maximalism was long periods of passive resentment punctuated between the 1860s and 1917 by ruthless terror to force the regime's liberalization or, better yet, bring about a revolution. As nothing short of a state overhaul would do, until that time one could grumble, seek refuge in the Russian village, war, dueling, travel, sloth, or love affairs, as did the so-called "superfluous men" (*lishnie lyudi*): Pushkin's Onegin, Mikhail Lermontov's Pechorin, Ivan Turgenev's Rudin, and Ivan Goncharov's Oblomov.

The *Vekhi* Indictment. *Vekhi*, published in 1909, took the intelligentsia to task for its addiction to sweeping state solutions and for the glaring disconnect between the nobility of its declared goals and the methods for achieving them. A collection of philosophical, historical, and political essays, the book became central to the debates before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and continued to influence Russian thinkers outside the Soviet Union, where it remained banned for seventy years until the glasnost era.

The seven authors—leading intellectuals and (all but two) former Marxists—criticized the intelligentsia for living for (and sacrificing for) the future instead of improving the present, for blaming external forces (the government) for all ills of society, and for believing that once the evil regime was eliminated, both the daily affairs and the moral health of the country would become exemplary.

No, the authors of *Vekhi* contended. A glorious future was possible only through the hard work of extinguishing the inner slave who was unused to "daily nonheroic labor, concentration and discipline, without a sense of duty and personal responsibility and the need for self-improvement."²³ In the words of the great Russian philosopher and a contributor to the collection, Nikolay Berdyaev: "We shall be free of external repression only when we free ourselves from the inner slavery, that is, take the responsibility [for our life] and stop blaming external

forces for everything.”²⁴ Absent such commitment, the *Vekhi* authors argued, the intelligentsia’s Manichaeism and penchant for radical solutions would result not in people’s happiness but in worse bloodshed, brutality, and despotism than the one they were struggling against.

A New Chekhov *Intelligent*. As if heeding the *Vekhi*’s call, Fandorin’s first priority is not to change Russia, but to change himself—or rather to change Russia by changing himself and helping others around him to change as well. He is not defined—and does not define himself—by his attitude toward the state, but by his attitude toward his countrymen, many of whom he guides and some of whom he saves. He does not look to the state—with hatred or hope—as a tool of reaction to reform or destroy or a bearer of progress to support.

His virtues are private, not only because they are not advertised but, more important, because their worth is not measured by short-term state goals or cultural fads. Chkhartishvili’s hero is devoid of the intelligentsia’s uncompromising and final division into good and evil and its congenital manic-depressive disorder of fanatic attachment to a leader or ideals followed by equally intense hatred and disdain.

As if to drive the point further home, Chkhartishvili constructed his character as a living antithesis to every negative stereotype of the Russian intelligentsia. He is practical, pragmatic, attentive to detail, energetic, competent, physically fit, disciplined, and capable of long, hard work. (His hobby is constructing and testing a new means of transportation, the automobile, and he sets several distance records, including one from Moscow to Paris.)

Fandorin’s temperament reflects that of Anton Chekhov as the latter emerges from his letters and the recollections of his contemporaries: neither optimist nor pessimist, but a pragmatic skeptic who believes in a few self-made and self-policed rules of honorable living while being wary of grandiose social projects.²⁵ Though not a joiner, Fandorin would have been sympathetic to the efforts of a character in Chekhov’s “A House with a Mezzanine”: a young woman by the name of Lida Volchaninova who volunteers as a village teacher, provides peasants with medicines, and lobbies the elected local officials (*zemstvo*), for a health clinic. “One cannot be idle,” Lida tells another character, a typical radical *intelligent* who disparages incremental improvements and pins hopes on a revolution. “True, we are not saving humanity . . . but we do what we can.”²⁶

Chkhartishvili’s hero daily practices the four virtues that Chekhov believed to be Russia’s only hope: decency, dignity, competence, and hard work. Fandorin is a response to Chekhov’s complaint to Maxim Gorky:

In order to live well, to live like a human being, one must work, mustn’t one?! Work with love, with faith. But we [in Russia] cannot do it. I have not met a single official who understood, even a little bit, the objectives of his work: usually he sits in the capital or a provincial city, writes instructions and sends them to [remote fictional provinces of] Zmieva and Smorgon’ to be carried out. Yet whom these instructions will deprive of freedom in Zmieva and Smorgon’—about that our official thinks as much as an atheist about the tortures of hell. They all have the same dog psychology: when beaten, they whimper and crawl into the dog houses, when stroked—roll onto their backs, with legs up and wag their little tails.²⁷

Fandorin negates the stereotypical Russian bureaucratic ills of laziness and incompetence, indifference to those below, and servility to those above. He loves his work, performs it brilliantly; he treats others according to their abilities and effort, not rank. Amid corruption, Fandorin repeatedly refuses bribes. Where rulers and ruled alike disregard laws, he is scrupulously law-abiding. Surrounded by vulgarity, he shows a refined taste.

Serving Russia

Fandorin’s occupation is an ideal venue for a man of his credo. In the tradition of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot, and Lord Wimsey, Fandorin is an individualist,* fiercely guarding his independence. This being Russia, he is not quite a “private” eye: employed by the Moscow

* Because of individualism Soviet literature failed—or rather was not allowed—to produce a single great detective in seventy years despite the immense popularity of translated detective stories. In the mid-1970s a television series *Sledstvie vedut znatoki* (Experts are investigating) gingerly introduced three police detectives. An instant hit, the show was canceled after a few years. One can catch reruns on Russian television today.

police and later an “official for special assignments” (*chinovnik po osobym porucheniyam*) of the Moscow governor general, he is more like George Simenon’s Commissaire Maigret.

While with the Moscow police, he attempts to put into practice a radical—for Russia—idea first articulated by Chatskiy, the hero of Alexander Griboedov’s classic play *Gore ot Uma* in the 1820s: “To serve the cause, not the individuals” (*sluzhit delu, a ne litsam*)²⁸ and serve (*sluzhit*) but not be “subservient” (*prisluzhivat*).²⁹ Risking his life in carrying out his duties, Fandorin lets everyone know that he has assumed those tasks voluntarily. Occasionally he threatens to resign and eventually does—and walks away from a promotion to the head of Moscow police. Disliked by a new Moscow governor general appointed by the incompetent court in St. Petersburg, Fandorin leaves Russia, works as a detective for hire in Europe and the United States, and returns to his country only to help solve crimes that pique his curiosity or to pursue criminals who had escaped him.

Seizing on the opportunities offered by a new, freer Russia, Fandorin devises nothing short of an existential breakthrough: a third way for the intelligentsia, which historically fluctuated between opposition to the state and resignation, dour cynicism, sullen submission, and shoddy work. By contrast, Fandorin is an honorable and free man: he offers the state conscientious service until and unless his tasks contradict his private moral code.

“Fandorin is what a national Russian character—for different political and historic reasons—has always lacked: honorable self-restraint, privacy, and dignity,” Chkhartishvili said.³⁰ Recalling Chekhov’s moral imperative of “squeezing out the slave drop by drop,”³¹ Chkhartishvili pointed out that squeezing out the slave from everyone’s souls was the most important result of the past fifteen years in Russia. “We have squeezed out a lot,” he said. “In the past ten or fifteen years, people living in this country have straightened their backs.”³² To Fandorin’s creator the “most precious product of this evolution” is dignity: a quality that had been “in a catastrophically short supply” throughout Russian history (and that shortage, Russia’s “main problem”) but is inbred in the post-Soviet generation.³³

Fandorin makes clear that he serves neither the chief of the Moscow police nor Moscow’s mayor nor even, as the reader discovers in *Koronatsiya* (Coronation), the tsar himself. He serves his country.³⁴

In *Smert’ Akhillesa* (The death of Achilles), a beloved general, a hero of the victorious campaign against the

Ottoman Turks and a symbol of Russian military valor, is found murdered in highly compromising circumstances. The general’s aide-de-camp implores Fandorin: “Promise that you will not use your detective talent to harm the motherland. Russia’s honor is at stake!” Fandorin answers, “I promise that I will not do anything against my honor, and, I think, this should be enough.”³⁵ Not that Russia’s honor did not matter to Fandorin, but to him the honor of the motherland equaled, and could not be more than, the sum of the individual honor of its citizens.

His patriotism, while strong, is intensely personal. In *Lyubovnitsa smerti* (Death’s mistress), Fandorin and his companion encounter nationalist demonstrators celebrating a minor military victory over the Chinese in the Far East.

They carried portraits of the tsar, icons, church banners (*khorugvi*). They chanted “Hurrah, Russia!” They marched, sweaty, red-faced, happy but, at the same time, irritated, as if someone had insulted them.

“Look,” said Kolombina. “They are crude, inebriated, and angry, but they are patriots and they love the Motherland. See how happy they are? And you and I, educated, polite, nicely dressed, don’t care at all about Russia.”

“These are not patriots.” [Fandorin] shrugged his shoulders. “These are just loud mouths. Just a safe way to bawl, nothing more. True patriotism, like true love, never crows about itself.”³⁶

A New Hero for a New Country

In addition to their literary qualities and offer of escapism, the Fandorin books likely owe at least some of their success to the hero’s excellent fit with the imperatives of today’s Russia. The romantic era of the revolution is past. The fierce battles over privatization, the constitution that promulgated private property and democracy, de-Bolshevization, demilitarization of the country and the economy have all played out; following the historic December 1999 parliamentary elections, all became part of a national consensus.

Fandorin’s ideals are precisely what is required in Putin’s Russia, where personal efforts (the “small deeds” of Chekhov’s time) by millions are far more important than the feats of a few: work hard, be honest, do not take bribes, pay taxes, be creative, take risks, abide by laws and force others to do so. Most

important, Fandorin's insistence on serving and assuming personal responsibility for his country is key to the emergence of a civil society, without which Russia will never become a liberal democracy. "These are people," Chkhartishvili says of his readers, "with an absolutely new mentality, who are used to relying on themselves, not on the government. These are people thinking big of themselves."³⁷

Fandorin's goal of organizing the space closest to him recalls a motto of the bourgeois middle class: the coda of Voltaire's *Candide*. Responding to yet another of Pangloss's sermons about grand schemes at work in "the best of all possible worlds," Candide says, "That is well said, but we must work in our garden" (*Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin*).

That plan coincides with what might be called the privatization of national goals, of the criteria of national greatness. For the first time in Russian history, the national aspirations have shifted from the glory and military might of the state to the welfare of individual citizens.

As Boris Yeltsin declared in 1997:

A great power is not mountains of weapons and subjects with no rights. A great power is a self-reliant and talented people with initiative. In the foundation of our approach to the building of the Russian state . . . is the understanding that the country begins with each of us. And the sole measure of the greatness of our Motherland is the extent to which each citizen of Russia is free, healthy, educated, and happy.³⁸

In his state-of-Russia address to the National Assembly in April 2002, Vladimir Putin elaborated:

The most important thing today is to create conditions for the citizens of Russia to earn money . . . to earn and invest in the economy of their own country with profit to themselves. We must make Russia a flourishing and rich country [in which people are] comfortable and secure, [where they are] free to work and make money for themselves and their children without limitations and fear.³⁹

In the most reliable expression of public opinion, millions of Russians voted with their hard-earned rubles for values that they found constant in the Akunin books. The success of the series may signal an enormously

important social transformation: the transmutation of the intelligentsia—for centuries bound to the state in its role as employer and as the sole vehicle of social change—into self-supporting intellectuals, a part of the post-Soviet postsocialist middle and occasionally upper-middle class.

Russia's leading free-market economist and political philosopher, Vladimir Mau, described the context in which the metamorphosis is unfolding:

The liberal economy, which opens vast space for creative effort and, at the same time, makes one earn one's daily bread by one's labor, without waiting for crumbs from the state, creates conditions for the formation of intellectuals truly independent from state. This is no longer a grumbling and perennially unhappy intelligentsia, lamenting how constantly unappreciated it is. Here there is simply no time to grumble and complain, here one must work and earn. (Alas, there is much less time to read for pleasure.) Yet forged here is a new intellectual elite, which considers the state as its employee and which is capable of directly . . . influencing the powers that be.⁴⁰

Like Hero, like Author (and Publisher)

Like his hero, Chkhartishvili is a new Russian *intelligent*. Born in Georgia in 1956 and a Muscovite since two, he is a graduate of the history and philology department of the Moscow Institute of Asian and African Countries, where he majored in Japanese language and culture. He is a translator of Japanese literature and the editor of the twenty-volume *Anthology of Japanese Literature*; until two years ago he was the deputy editor of the elite literary monthly *Inostrannaya Literatura*, which for decades brought Soviet and Russian readers translations of foreign authors. His pen name, Akunin, comes from the Japanese for bad guy, bad character. (In the word games that Chkhartishvili constantly plays with his readers, *B. Akunin* could easily be [*Mikhail*] *Bakunin*—the Russian revolutionary, philosopher, and the prophet of anarchism in the nineteenth century.)

Chkhartishvili thinks of his books as a multimedia project, a business venture, and he puts himself in charge of the production and promotion to the last detail. A true intellectual entrepreneur, he insists on writing the scripts for the television series based on his books and on approving the directors and actors. No traditional coyness of the

intelligentsia colors his pursuit of the most profit from the sale of his product.

Chkhartishvili numbers himself among the ten or so serious Russian writers who earn \$100,000–500,000 annually from their books: an enormous amount for post-Soviet writers, whose print runs are no longer determined by the Central Committee's propaganda department but by the fiercely competitive marketplace of an emergent market in a country with a per capita income of \$8,000. "Intellectuals can finally achieve commercial success doing what they enjoy," Chkhartishvili told an interviewer. "For Russia, it's a new idea."⁴¹ He admits: "Like all normal people, there was a time when I wanted to leave the country. I am glad that I have not."⁴²

In his risk-taking, practicality, and self-reliance, Chkhartishvili's publisher also is quite similar to the book's hero. Igor Zakharov is another product of post-Soviet Russia. A graduate of the philological department of Leningrad State University, a former diplomat (he was a press attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa in the early 1970s), and a newspaper editor and columnist, he started his publishing house, Zakharov, in 1998 by printing at his own expense 25,000 copies of two books. One book was *Azazel*, by "an unknown translator of Japanese turned mystery writer named Boris Akunin."⁴³

The Zakharov publishing house is a tight ship. The owner's wife is the director and deals primarily with typography and suppliers, while Zakharov focuses on the authors and the press. Yet, Zakharov explains, the division of labor is fluid: "We are interchangeable. It is absolutely marvelous that we can have business meeting at one o'clock in the morning."⁴⁴

In addition to the Fandorin books, Zakharov's publications (a list of which is to be found in every Fandorin book) include the biographies and memoirs of Napoleon, Prince Feliks Yusupov (one of Rasputin's assassins), Lady Randolph Churchill, Somerset Maugham, Joseph Brodsky, and Elizabeth II (the latter translated by "G. Chkhartishvili"), as well as translations of John Updike, Roald Dahl (both the adult and children's books), Dickens, T. S. Eliot, and Sylvia Plath. The last two pages of every book carry a framed announcement: **ЗДЕСЬ МОГЛА БЫТЬ ВАША РЕКЛАМА (YOUR AD COULD HAVE BEEN HERE)**.

"Doubt and Good Taste." In 1993 the Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Brodsky—one of Russia's finest poets of the twentieth century, exiled from the Soviet Union in 1972—appealed to the Czech president (and

fellow writer and dissident), Vaclav Havel, to serialize the world's best literature in newspapers. "By giving your people Proust, Kafka, Faulkner, Platonov, Camus, or Joyce," Brodsky wrote, "you may turn at least one nation in the heart of Europe into a civilized people . . . for there is no better antidote to the vulgarity of the human heart than doubt and good taste, which one finds fused in works of great literature."⁴⁵

Although, as a professional philologist and linguist, he would be the first to admit that he and his books are not in the front row of world literature, Chkhartishvili nevertheless seems to have had something quite similar in mind in creating Fandorin. "I would like, on the sly, to pass onto the reader a national idea which is called 'great Russian literature.' . . . Great Russian literature is the best that our country has created, an area in which we are . . . no worse than the rest of the countries. It is, therefore, not an accident that I bake my adventure novels from this magic dough."

In seeking to forge a new moral code to guide them while swamped by the onrush of modernity, liberty, and choice, the men and women of Russia's emerging middle class could have done much worse for a role model than Akunin's dapper, smart, fit, honorable, brave, and handsome hero.

Notes

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3. Brian Killen, "Émigré's Enigma Wins Booker Prize," *Moscow Times*, December 7, 2000, p. 4.
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9. Arkady Ostrovsky, "Taking Literature to the Middle Classes," *Financial Times*, April 9, 2001, p. 8.
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17. Yury Lebedev, *Russkaya Literatura XIX veka. Chast' vtoraya* (Russian nineteenth-century literature, part 2) (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1994), p. 276.
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20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, as quoted in Roger Scruton, "Sartre," in Anthony Kenny, *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 235.
21. Nabokov, *Lectures*, p. 3.
22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions Books, 1971), p. 29.
23. Igor Kliamkin, "Kakaya ulitza vedyet k khramu?" (Which street leads to the church?) *Novy Mir*, November 1987, p. 163.
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28. Alexander Griboedov, *Gore ot uma* (Grief from intelligence), act 1, scene 2 (Moscow: Detskaya literatura, 1967), p. 14.
29. Ibid., act 2, scene 1, p. 31.
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31. Anton Chekhov, letter to A. S. Suvorin, January 7, 1889, in Chekhov, *Sobranie*, vol. 11, pp. 317–18.
32. "Boris Akunin: V blizhayshie mesyatsy dolzhno opredelit'sya, po kakomu puti poydyot Rossiya" (Boris Akunin: The next few months will determine the road taken by Russia), interview with the Itogi Show on the NTV network, April 29, 2001 (accessed at www.ntv.ru/itogi).
33. Ibid.
34. "I serve not you but Russia," Fandorin tells the head of the Russian police. "And I will not participate in a war which is useless and even harmful to Russia" (*Turetskiy gambit*, p. 38).
35. *Smert' Akhillesa*, p. 37.
36. *Lyubovnitsa smerti*, p.158.
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41. Chazan, "Russian Authors."
42. Ostrovsky, "Taking literature."
43. Korneva, "Igor Zakharov."
44. Ibid.
45. Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux/Noonday Press, 1997), p. 222.