

# Going west or going back?

## Searching for new male identity

by **Daria Dmitrieva**

“Russia, the year of 199... The state does not exist. There is no army.” With these words, the action and fantasy comic book *Through Blood and Suffering* begins. No army: the main structure that organized male identity has collapsed in the crisis of the 1990s. The great search for the post-Soviet male identity begins.

One of the symbolic forms in which this search took place was the comics. What answers can research into comics give us about male identity? Comics show and tell at the same time. This symbiosis creates a special type of narration – text and visual line complement each other, forcing the reader to perform two types of work – reading the text and reading the visual narration, which, without a doubt, requires a greater engagement by the reader, and allows the authors of comics to enlarge their expression.

In this paper, I will show how the comics of the publishing house Veles-V.A. produced symbolic forms that represent problems of masculine identity that existed in the 1990s in Russia.

### abstract

The stereotype of the Soviet man was destroyed in the early 1990s. New forms of culture, such as comic books, tried to invent new male models. In 1991, a group of authors started to publish the comic magazine *Veles*, in which patterns of male identity were constructed. The comics expressed a form of sublimation of post war and post Soviet trauma. The new patterns drew inspiration from three areas: American superheroes, epic Slavic characters, and the heroes of the war in Afghanistan. The army and the Afghan experience became the cornerstone, on which the new understanding of the male identity in the new cultural environment was built.

**KEY WORDS:** Comics, postsoviet Russia, monsters, male identity, Veles.



*The Mice Are Burying the Cat*, a 1760s lubok print. It has been commonly thought that this plot is a caricature of Peter the Great's burial.

When the authors of these comics created their images of heroes, they tried to find some exemplars and fundamental values on which to base them, instead of the broken idols of the USSR. Where did they search for them? How were their fears and hopes symbolized? In the end, what values did they find? I studied Russian comic art produced by the publishing house Veles-V.A. in Ekaterinburg, which existed from 1991 to 1998. Dur-

ing this period, seven issues of the magazine *Veles*, two issues of humor comics, and two issues of “The Collections of Comics” were published.

**THE FIRST THREE RELEASES** of the comic strips were published in 1991 on black-and-white newsprint. The issues were called “The Collection of Comics”. Starting in 1992, the issues began to be published in a magazine format, called *Veles*.

The authors were searching for models of their heroes in Western culture (Mazda, Batman, Conan, Spider-Man, and others), Slavic mythology, the Far East, the fantastic future, fairy tales, and the historical past. Connecting mythological and media modes creates a special type of imagery, the new heroes of the 1990s – New Slavs or “new Russians”. According to my estimations, 20% of the stories in all the Veles-V.A. issues are devoted to humorous topics, and the remaining 80% to heroic stories in different genres, mostly fantasy and fiction. Veles's comics contain no stories centered on a female character; these stories are narrations by a man about a man in a situation of social crisis.

I argue that the search for a hero is very symptomatic of the Russian male consciousness of the 1990s. By examining comics by Veles-V.A., I will also show how a man of the 1990s thought of his body, his role in the family, his social status, and more: his place in the political system, his relations to authorities, his purpose, and his highest aim.

## The roots of comic art in Russia

The tradition of comic art in Russia commences with primitivistic pictures, *lubok*. The peculiarity of *lubok* is that it involves a viewer – a reader – in a kind of game with socio-political signs.<sup>2</sup> In the beginning of the Soviet era, the same role is occasioned by the political poster. As Jose Alaniz writes,<sup>3</sup> visual culture forms the central front in the war of ideas. The Proletkult's projects are the primary example of this. In the second half of the twentieth century, two currents of comic strip art were formed in the Soviet Union. The first are the dissident comics. Some people who had been subject to persecution shared their experience in visual form. The most striking example is *The Rock-Painting* by E. Kersnovskaya.<sup>4</sup> Her notebooks, which she created in the Gulag, with comments, which she inserted later, is a story transferred to a visual form – “the evidence of the historical process”, as Walter Benjamin wrote.<sup>5</sup> The second, official line of comic development in the USSR is children's comics. Everyone read the magazines *Funny Pictures* and *Murzilka* as a child. Here, the comic strip performs an entertaining and humorous function.

It can be concluded that the comics' themes were always either burning social issues, containing direct political statements, or merely childish.

The situation changed in the 1990s. Comic art began a new life in Russia. At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, comics were produced by keen enthusiasts, who knew Western comics and admired them. With the help of such an unexpected cultural form as comics, authors tried to embody in visual images their anticipation of a new life, new stories, new possibilities, and new identities.

The Veles-V.A. publishing house existed from 1991 to 1998; and published comics until 1995. It was not the only project of its kind: there was also, for example, the comic magazine *The Fly*<sup>6</sup> in Ufa and the PIF publishing house in Yekaterinburg. All these were individual initiatives: people without experience and professional knowledge, but full of enthusiasm, began to draw and publish comics.

## War, identity, masculinity, and comics

The publishing house was originally registered as a company of the Russian *Union of Afghan Veterans Veles-V.A.* – and this was no accident. The title *Structural unit Veles* was placed on the cov-



"Red blood". *Veles* no. 6, 1996.

er of the first issue. At the bottom of the page was the note, “By purchasing our products you are making a contribution to assistance work for disabled people and the families of the fallen”.

Initially, the publishing house was conceived as a patriotic project associated with veterans of Afghanistan. The editor-in-chief and manager of the project was an agent of the Air Force, Igor Ermakov. In 1985 to 1987, he had participated in combat operations in Afghanistan and received many military awards.

The Afghan War generation tried to create comics in post-Soviet Russia. They were not businessmen and knew nothing about marketing and the comics industry. Still, their work is very representative, because these authors' comics also became a sphere in which the fears and stress of 1990s could be sublimated. Afghanistan formed their values and it is not surprising that the topic of war

and defense was extremely important to the publishers.

THE DISCOURSE OF WAR in the USSR spreads far beyond the phenomena directly involving the military and its activities. V. A. Sukovataya<sup>7</sup> notes that war is a central topic in the Soviet public consciousness. Even the topic of labor is understood in terms of a military struggle, such as a “feat of labor” or a “battle for the harvest”. The feat on the battlefield is one of the central cultural scenes in the formation of masculinity. Its image on the screen served an ideological function in Soviet gender ideology, in which the role and the image of the soldier is somehow incorporated into other contemporary heroic roles and images of masculinity, whether as a miner or a builder of an underground railway, a steeplejack, a communist, an engineer, or a seaman.

War increases collective masculine identity and forms a set of connections between the dominant masculinities, the hierarchies of homosocial power, and the politics of the male body. The discourse of protection of women and children designates the constancy of the protected. The enemy, which can also be constituted by the problem faced by labor (in the battle for the harvest, etc.), is always assigned by the state. This characterizes the Soviet masculine identity as opposed to that of the West.

What happens to the structure of “Who is protecting whom from what?” of Orwell's perpetual war during the period of political and social crisis of the early 1990s?

In 1991, with the nearly complete elimination of the regulatory function of authorities, all suppressed aggression and sexuality becomes free and is immediately directed towards

a great number of objects: at formerly protected women and children, at other men; autoaggression and a whole complex of phantasms appear – vague media representations consisting of indistinct images of an enemy. A Soviet man, unaccustomed to the new active role, starts to search for “his own war” or to create it artificially. The comics of the Veles-V.A. publishing house, in this regard, are very symptomatic.

### Searching for the new masculinity: why?

We may examine the traumatic experience of the state’s collapse in the two-part comic story *Through Blood and Suffering*. The plot is extremely vague; the full importance of what is happening is transmitted by the particular details. The country is experiencing a post-apocalyptic shock. The protagonist, Andrew, a soldier, is sitting at home doing the laundry. Suddenly he receives the order (it is not known from whom: the letter is slid under the door) to go to the forest and find a messenger there. The scene of Andrew’s packing for the campaign is significant – originally, it is the classic Soviet cliché “Portrait of a Man with Vodka”: he sits at the table, shown full face, in front of him a bottle, a faceted glass, and sliced bread. We also observe a live grenade on the table, which indicates the status of a warrior. The next few shots involve him equipping himself in his uniform and grasping the weapon. The equipment of the hero is drawn in detail right up to his cap, which he wears in the manner of an action hero from an American movie.

Military attributes become the key to the restoration of the usual picture of the world of a Hero-Defender – the mission is received, he starts to fulfill it. Andrew goes to the forest, where he accidentally meets the family of the former university employee, Yura with his wife, son, and sister. The situation “women and children” is restored. Yura is a typical unemployed man of the 1990s, trying to adjust to the new capitalist way of life. This need to adjust, to change, is embodied in the following figure: at night it turns out that Yura and all his relatives are vampires, robots, and zombies, and at night they attack Andrew. Social transformation is shown as a process of physiological mutation. The topic of lycanthropy is found in practically all of the comics. In the comic book *Duel*,<sup>8</sup> a lovely wife suddenly turns out to be a monster; in the fairy tale about Ivan, a peasant’s son, a woman turns into mermaid; in the comic book *Veles* a warrior man turns out to be a woman; and so on.

These transformations indicate two important things: the fragility and instability of the familiar world and the enemy’s image blurring and dissolving into everyday life.

Blurring the contours of the enemy leads to blurring the concepts of friend and foe: familiar relationships are being shaken. (An example is the comic book *Duel*: in the first frame, the hero is sitting with his wife drinking wine, and in a second frame, she becomes a zombie and tries to kill him.)

But let us come back to the comic book *Through Blood and Suffering*. The shaky, restored structure collapses. Andrew destroys everybody, leaving only the child Sergei alive, but nearly turned into a monster, half robot, half zombie.

Foreseeing trouble, Andrew still cannot kill Sergei; he takes him along instead. Here again is the logic of protection: a child needs to be protected. They fight together against savages and the communist helicopter, the pilot of which calls Andrew “the Democrat.” However, it is obvious that if there is no army, the tasks to be accomplished still seem vague. As a result, Sergei attacks Andrew and turns him into a vampire.

Andrew, in turn, attacks the messenger whom they have been going to see. Thus, the hero is transformed into something else entirely.

In this comic, the logic of the loss of identity of a Hero-Defender is sequentially presented: initially it is the providers of goals that disappear – state and army (a kind of totality), then the representation of the protected individual (“women and children” turn out to be monsters), then the enemy (anyone can be an enemy, even a child), then the task (the messenger becomes the victim), and then the hero himself (I’m a monster, not a military man).

**BUT THE COMIC’S STORY** does not end there. A rather non-trivial way out of this situation is offered as one more transformation happens. The boy, Sergei, returns to being a nude blond boy with a perfectly proportioned body, and caps off the triumph of the developing race, which appears through the sequential transformation “man-vampire-superman”. The pronounced physicality of the new Sergei bears emphasis. The political and economic situation in 1991 resulted in a change of moral ideals, involving most of all sexual liberation in the public

sphere. “Post-Soviet masculinity is trying at any cost to overcome the Soviet ‘trauma’ of asceticism and asexuality, and as a result, becomes a ‘neurotic masculinity’,” writes the professor and theorist in the field of gender studies V.A. Sukovataya.<sup>9</sup> And in the image of the transformed Sergei, we see the new type of masculinity – a narcissistic masculinity. In *The Theory of Libido and Narcissism*, Freud<sup>10</sup> speaks about secondary narcissism – numerous cases of delusions of grandeur and erotomania in



*Through Blood and Suffering*. 1992.

which the subject is the main protagonist. The individual is trying to reproduce his infancy, where there are not boundaries between subject and object. The *Veles* comics manifest the same effort.

## Search in the Slavic mythology

The example is one of the central comic strips of the magazine – the serial comics story *Veles*.<sup>11</sup> The main character is a young man called Veles, the adopted son of the Slavic god Volos. He was brought up by his servants – pseudo-mythological persons – Pleshilo and Baba Yaga. Pleshilo is a small creature, who can perform magic if needed, and Baba Yaga is an old woman living in the forest. Vladimir Propp saw her as the guardian of the border between life and death, but in the comic, she is just the foster mother of the main hero.

Veles himself has a heroic, mythological body. The body of the hero has manifest gender characteristics – broad shoulders, powerful trunk, muscles in sharp relief, large stature. His face also has all the signs of masculinity – wide square jaw, broad nostrils, large eyebrows, high cheekbones. There are clear similarities between the hero of the *Veles* series and a savage man in the Western tradition such as Conan the Barbarian.<sup>12</sup> (Indeed, the Russian authors make no secret of their sympathies: they had already published a translated comic book about Conan in the second issue of the *Collection of comics* in 1992.)

IT IS INTERESTING that at a certain moment the hero Veles turns out to be naked and then for some time continues his exploits without clothes. Nudity is an important factor in the development of the hero, his achievement of excellence and of superhuman status. We have already seen this in the comic story *Through Blood and Suffering* in the updated image of Sergei.

The hero Veles fights various enemies. Originally, the purpose of the battle is to test himself. Having passed three tests (battles with a bear, with wolves, and with an eagle), Veles is given a task by his adoptive father Volos. The mission is extremely obscure – to get the “datura flower” (some kind of drug, with the help of which Almighty Volos will supposedly conquer all people – but this is unknown to the hero). Having received the task, the hero, without further questions, begins to execute it – it is a

comfortable situation for him, as we have already seen. He has incredible strength and the ability to conjure. However, there is one condition – loving a woman will deprive the hero of strength.

IN GENERAL, IMAGES OF WOMEN are rare in the pages of these collections and only four types can be found: a friend or companion-in-arms, a forbidden sexual object, an enemy, and a monster. Often a woman who is initially attractive turns into an ugly monster, threatening the hero’s life.

At a certain stage in the adventure, Veles meets a beautiful girl, Vesnyana, who attracts him, but the formidable Old Queen of the country tries to shift the hero’s attention to herself. The hero turns both women down because he remembers that love can strip him of his strength. As a result, young Vesnyana is replaced by an older woman, an enemy, who in the end causes the loss of a young lover and an attack on the hero by a huge swarm of wasps. The hero cannot influence the events, so he does not respond to the rupture of relations with his beloved.

The comic’s authors try to oppose the Soviet pattern of suppressed, injured masculinity to an ideal image, an “I-man” of flourishing physicality and sexuality. But it is still suppressed by two things: an unmotivated prohibition on sexual relations, and an unauthorized and unmotivated purpose. Both of these factors are introduced from the Soviet past and make him experience the trauma of his own masculinity again and again through the impossibility of realizing it in normal sexual relationships. The hero has to sublimate his strength in new exploits; he actually falls into an exclusive circle: he is lonely, and women and other men are excluded from the field of vision. Limited sexual-

ity with expressive physicality turns the hero’s adventures into a process of continuous traumatic experiences.

The trauma returns in the form of fantasies of more and more gigantic enemies. All of them best the hero several times; they have dark threatening appearances: mammoths, dragons, snakes, monsters. . . .

Finally, the hero arrives at the place where the datura flower grows, but he cannot seize it: he does not have the strength to pull it out of the ground. The situation is resolved unexpectedly. The goddess of death Morshana appears, who uproots and gives a flower to the hero for no special reason, without any conditions, just because she liked him: “I liked you, pretty,



*Veles*, no 5, 1994.

stupid!” she says and gives him a flower. This turn of events raises the question about the value of the flower and of the heroic deed of its acquisition. Indeed, a great deed is not important in itself, it is only important as the formal presence of a task and the activities involved in executing it.

We see the narcissistic masculinity of the hero with the perfect body who admires himself. He and his exploits form a single world where monsters are a required element. Any difficulty is resolved by external influence, as if that is the way things should be.

### Searching in the West

Masculinity also develops, in a different way, as the adaptation of something foreign. Comics are a phenomenon of Western culture, and, of course, the authors try to adapt characters to create a model of masculine identity. Their adaptation of the superhero Batman<sup>13</sup> is illustrative.

The author of the work is unknown; only one series of comics was released, and the adventures remained unfinished. Interestingly, Batman is used on several levels. First, there is the formal graphic level: Batman is painted in the style of the contemporary comics about this superhero; it is the Batman of the 1990s. The authors were graphics masters and knew contemporary American comics well, as indicated by how their use of the graphic organization of the panels to express the dynamic structure of the plot, the choice of foreshortenings, and the representation of the characters.<sup>14</sup>

Second, he is adapted as a hero: he is presented as a defender, although active and independent. Third, at the level of plot: Batman, as the American millionaire, decides to help the children of the Volga region, not with his millions, but by struggling against a maniac with an axe.

**ALSO IN THE COLLECTIONS** of Veles-V.A. are comics involving Conan the Barbarian, the Japanese-American hero Mazda, calques from multiple action films, and the agent Z (a detective comic character) – to name just a few. Around some Western heroes an original story is created – for example, the comic strip *Save the Earth*<sup>15</sup> uses the stylistics and the heroics of *Star Wars*.

In fact, the comics of the early 1990s, the aim of which was to entertain teens and adults, were often created by direct transfer of the Western tradition to the Soviet sphere.



Batman. *Humor comics* no 1, 1992.

Neither Batman nor other adapted characters can reduce the stress associated with the loss of male identity. The authors of these comics enthusiastically and expertly replicate the original stylistics of the prototype, but cannot develop an alien for their type of heroic character, cannot give him a fully developed life in the literary work.

The comics about Western heroes are episodic; they do not occupy a significant place in the pages of the issues, being rather a kind of literacy campaign in the culture of comics rather than a serious attempt to set the behavioral model of a Western hero before the Russian reader.

The appeal to a variety of Western heroes, from Conan to Batman, from Ninja Turtles to characters from *Star Wars*, shows the

uncertainty of the Russian authors' search. None of the series achieves much development, or completeness.

### Searching in the Soviet past

We see that the search for a hero – a model for the formation of a new type of masculinity – takes place in comics in several ways: in mythology, in Western popular culture, and in fictional epics. But the search in the recent Soviet past turns out to be the most productive.

The first issue of serial comics, *Red Blood*, became a sensation.<sup>16</sup> The main character Ivan endures challenging trials and tribulations during the war in Afghanistan. He loses friends, and witnesses death, cowardice, and heroism. At home waiting for his girlfriend. . . . The authors narrate their experiences of the war in Afghanistan, and the comic book receives the greatest response, judging by letters reprinted from readers.

“Each generation has its own war – the Civil War, the Great Patriotic War, Afghanistan. . . .” says Ivan, the *Red Blood* comics' hero, to his girlfriend before his mobilization. Ivan reproduces the most important Soviet male identity: that of the warrior-defender. “War, as an experience of gender policy, is one of the key methods of forming the male/virile body,” the researcher Irina Novikova<sup>17</sup> says.

The authors classify this comics as a documentary, inscribing it in the tradition of such works as *The Rock-Painting* by

Kersnovskaya, and the Western graphic novels about a Holocaust survivor *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, and *Persepolis* by Marjan Satrapi. The purpose of works like this is to compensate for the absence of photos and documents – any visual fixation of the experience – and to create the author's own version of events from the perspective of a sharp social criticism. According to Peter Burke,<sup>18</sup> acts of “obvious–vision”, such as making documentary comics or photographs, are the moments that permit us to imagine the past and bring us face to face with history. Similar processes take place in the comic book *Red Blood* by Veles about the war in Afghanistan. The authors specifically point out that some of the images in the comics are based on actual photos, such as those depicting mutilated bodies of soldiers who have been tortured by the mujahedeen.

**IN THE COMIC BOOK**, Ivan's strength, endurance, self-control, and ability to stand up for himself are often depicted. But more actively, the authors of the comic book unfold a discourse of the soldier's code of honor and the importance of testing oneself “for heroism”. The first series of comics is dedicated to the period before departure for Afghanistan, which is particularly interesting.

Symptomatic is the scene in which the hero and his friends are walking through the streets of the city, and retirees are talking about them: “What have we come to? Look, young people wear everything American.” Indeed, the characters are dressed in the fashion of the time – skinny jeans, jackets, and so on. T-shirts and other types of shirts tightly cover their muscular chests. The girls passing by stare at them. The hero is understood as a real man – he gets approval from a woman, and the disapproving comments of the elderly only support the image of his manliness – he looks unmistakably like a man. Moreover, thanks to the remarks of old women we begin to sympathize sharply with the hero: these retirees do not know that the man they are criticizing has enlisted in the Air Force.

In the comics, we see that for its authors the Red Army is an ideal place for identity formation. The reminiscence about the oath of allegiance occupies the central place in the first chapter of the comic book as an event of paramount importance. The



Red Blood. Veles no. 1, 1992.

main character Ivan enlists in the army as a volunteer and specifically wants to get to Afghanistan to “test himself”.

#### FURTHER EVENTS UNFOLD

around the hero's service in Afghanistan, his military missions and Afghan fighters, the mujahedeen. A man's body is a soldier's body. At the level of the plot, the comic story gradually unfolds from the memory complex about the Soviet era to the chaos of war and captivity; however, the hero does not lose himself in it. This is no longer the post-apocalyptic chaos of the comic *Through Blood and Suffering*, and the enemy is not a fantastic monster, but one designated by the state: in the first issue the hero says that he must “fulfill his international duty in Afghanistan”.

The appeal to the topic of war symbolically restores the order connected with the structure of a warrior-defender,

and produces a powerful nostalgic impulse, forcing authors and readers, as early as 1993, to turn to the Soviet past for the reconstruction of male identity.

The hero remembers “his war”, and, following him, we encounter history.

According to Benjamin,<sup>19</sup> modernity takes the image of destroyer of the present. The present is dissolved in the past, transformed into debris before the eyes of the astonished angel of history:

**His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair . . . to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high.**

*Red Blood* takes us back to the point in the past, to the lost Paradise, when everything was right – there was a war and a sense of confidence in the reality of one's own experience of being a man.

## Conclusions: which identity, then?

The Veles-V.A. comics present a broad, complete coverage of the social problems of the transition to the post-Soviet period, and, in symbolic form, represent for the Russian reader a new form of entertaining comics. This form becomes not so much simply a guide to new values, but, to a greater extent, a mirror that reflects the complex of the loss of male identity that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet state system.

As we have seen, the “Hero-Defender” type of masculinity was shaped in the Soviet discourse, for which the most important structuring phenomenon is war. The entire reality of work and family life is also understood as a military situation, in which every man has a clearly defined place – he was the defender of “women-and-children” from an enemy assigned by the state.

The man still remains passive and depressed, he did not choose his goals, and in the job assigned him by the State and the Party, it is not his duty to try to achieve for himself and his family any kind of well-being, but rather to defend and protect.

Comics thus appear in the crisis period of rupture with the traditional Soviet masculinity and become the bearers of traces of this trauma. The authors of comics try to find new hero models, searching for them in Slavic mythology and in Western culture. In the second half of the 1990s, they produce the comic book *Red Blood*, which returns to the figure of the war, allowing the hero to reconstruct his identity nostalgically, and to survive the traumatic experience of the crisis of the 1990s. A man returns to his past and finds confidence in himself in the present.

Since the late 1990s, this process still has not been completed. Designing one’s own history, fantasizing about it, giving it additional values and meanings – this is one of the strongest trends in contemporary Russian culture. Symbolization of the experience of the past to overcome the crisis gave rise to the liquidation of historical reality as a whole. In its place, it creates a wonderful new past where it is possible to find the necessary identity – the patriarchal warrior – as if the 1990s had never happened. ✖

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