CREATIVE NONFICTION
The Golden Billion: Russia, COVID, Murderous
Global Elites

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SUMMARY  This essay tells the story of the hot, brooding summer that preceded
Russia’s “special military operation” attack on Ukraine: an attack that could not le-
gally be called a war and that many people in Russia supported even while they neither
trusted the media nor cared to talk about politics. Rallying support for this undeclared
war, Russian state rhetoric drew on images of WWII fascism, NATO expansion, and
morally rotten transnational elites: themes resonant with long-standing feelings of hurt
national pride and personal abandonment in the face of spiraling social stratification.
To many of its supporters, “the war seemed a relief after many years of stagnation,”
wrote the Moscow-based journalist Shura Burtin (2022). “Like a fire in prison: at least
there’ll be some commotion.” This essay describes a high point of this pregnant stagna-
tion. Written in August 2021, it draws on over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork in
North-Western Russia to examine the idea that a “Golden Billion” of the world’s most
powerful people governs to exterminate the rest of us—at a moment when this idea
seemed eminently reasonable. [Russia, populism, conspiracy theory, COVID-19, new
world order]

The summer of 2010 was abnormally hot. Temperatures in St. Petersburg
hovered around thirty degrees Celsius, and everything burned: forests, villages,
peat bogs. But the price of crude oil also hovered feverishly high, and while
some people saw Russia becoming an authoritarian police state, it was hard
to take them seriously. The year before, an odd mixture of liberal intelligentsia
and Natsbol punks had begun unsanctioned street protests in defense of the
Constitution’s Article 31, which back then still guaranteed the right of peaceful
assembly (Horvath 2015). Every thirty-first calendar day, they came out to exer-
cise this constitutional right, and the police beat them up. This was regrettable,
certainly, but I don’t remember it seriously affecting those apolitically carefree
oil-happy days. As the authoritarian bolts turned slowly to tighten, most of the
people around me neither paid much attention nor cared. And the idea that a
Golden Billion of the wealthiest people alive intends to exterminate the rest
of us with things like flu vaccines seemed as ludicrous to me back then as the “Flat Earth” movement does now, some decade later: part joke, part conspiracy theory, part t-shirt franchise.

I’m still in Russia today, eleven years later, working on a different ethnographic project and teaching. And over this time, I’ve noticed that theories of the Golden Billion have shifted. From the conspiratorial fringe, the image of a murderous global elite increasingly enters popular explanations of life under Russian neoliberalism. I now hear my most rational friends surmise idly that world leaders are actively trying to kill them, and I can no longer easily dismiss the idea.

As a conspiracy theory, the Golden Billion is fairly run-of-the-mill, at home easily among the Georgia Guidestones and the Elders and Zion (Gulyas 2016: 150; Bronner 2000): a story of saponaceous elites pulling strings to amass wealth and destroy regular people’s lives. I noticed it in 2010 only because I started an ethnographic project in Russia that year and the intense social openness ethnography demands made me attentive to conversations I might otherwise not have had reason to notice.

I first heard about the Golden Billion from a man I’ll call Konstantin. A former Soviet geologist turned Buddhist healer, he was about sixty at the time: virile, powerful, well-connected. His young wife described him as a man “patriarchal in character,” and his life of material luxury seemed to support his claim to have clients in top Kremlin circles. As Konstantin told it, the Golden Billion was somewhere between the Judeo-Masons and the New World Order, between old Soviet fears of “bio-energy” mind-control and new fears of vaccines and cancer-inducing GMOs. These theories were not out of place in his large central Moscow apartment, where patented magnetic devices protected us from “electro-magnetic smog” while we watched YouTube clips narrated by that computer-generated voice that unmistakably marks internet conspiracy videos. His clients subscribed to it, too: an old woman who claimed to have been a spy in Afghanistan and her daughter who claimed to be the wife of Moscow’s top Rabbi. The two of them had come for a course of Buddhist healing. The mother said that she used to work for the KGB in Kabul, that her father was a general, and that she was from Azerbaijan, and that’s why they sent her; but the Arabs are horrible, backstabbers, they’ll say one thing and do another. She believes in GOD, she told me. She told me that the world would end in 2012. She described in some detail how she helped steal the elections for the United Russia Party. She said that her grandson’s nanny abuses him. Her stories were riveting, and I did not think of testing their truth claims.

But now, as I write this, I am less interested in the conspiratorial core of this theory than I am in its workaday fringe. As the years pass, I notice more and more people accept as axiomatic that the governing forces that structure society might be seeking their deaths. They joke about it, half-believing, in horror and apathy. These people do not claim to have been spies in Afghanistan. They claim only that the COVID-related deaths of their parents are a great boon to the pension fund. They are neither punks nor members of the self-avowed intelligentsia. Many of them voted for Putin—and many voted against. They talk of their towns’ ongoing post-Soviet decay and attrition in the face of Moscow’s aggressive colonial centralization: of how the few enterprises that managed to
survive the Soviet collapse didn’t survive the 2014 Crimean crisis, while those that survived Crimea didn’t survive COVID, how major construction projects employ only out of town shift-workers, how all new stores are chain stores, how not even the train crews are local.

Distrust and hatred of international corporations merge in these narratives with hatred of high Russian bureaucrats, who have sold out the country and have turned a nice profit doing it, who vacation in the Swiss Alps and on the French Riviera while their fellow citizens are abandoned to poverty and early death. Such “New World Order” conspiracy theories have proliferated worldwide in the past several decades, in tandem with the expansion of global capitalism, and many of them are framed in explicitly nationalist terms (West and Sanders 2003; Rakopoulos 2018). But the Golden Billion is a New World Order theory of class. Poor people everywhere stand to be exterminated, regardless of ethnos (Kara-Murza 1999). Its accusatory logic is bottomless. While “pro-Kremlin intellectuals rapidly transformed the idea of the New World Order, which originated in the U.S.A., to criticize the U.S.A.” (Yablokov 2020: 589), this same idea is also commonly used to criticize the Kremlin itself.

A great many people in Russia today think it “eminently reasonable” (Marcus 1999, 2) that super-wealthy elites are screwing the rest of us over. People talk about infrastructure: convenience to the rich, death to the poor. They say that the high-speed trains running between Moscow and St. Petersburg since 2009 regularly kill local people and pass on without stopping. Official statistics of such deaths are not kept, news stories are terse. May 2021: “Following collision with the high-speed Sapsan train, a man died on the spot. His body lies under the station platform” (Makarov 2021). People talk about inexplicably cruel legislation, like the 2018 Federal Law 498, prohibiting killing, euthanizing, or otherwise culling healthy street dogs. The animals are instead to be castrated and “returned to their former habitat” where they, predictably, maul people (Cherkaev 2021). In spring 2021, the national going rate was about one person a week killed or left in critical condition.

Opinions differ about who exactly comprises the murderous global elite, what tactics they use, and to what aims. But there are several decisive topics around which these different viewpoints converge, and in 2021, one such topic was COVID. In the spring of that year, many countries lifted lock-down restrictions. With some ten percent of its population vaccinated, Russia did too. In June, St. Petersburg hosted the Euro 2021 Soccer Championship and the Russian Economic Forum. The number of cases started to climb. Citing epidemiological concerns, the annual Navy Salon closed its doors to the public. But a yacht with red sails went on parade as scheduled, drawing thirty thousand new high-school graduates downtown to behold it in celebration of youth. None of the kids were vaccinated. None could be: Russian vaccines were certified only for adults over eighteen. Maskless, hugging and swaying and breathing in unison, thousands of starry-eyed teenagers sang along with the pop stars who performed for them outside the State Hermitage. They then watched a boat with red sails float along the Neva and sang the Russian National Anthem. Alcohol sales were banned that day in the city, major bridges and thoroughfares closed to traffic, the city center blocked off to everyone without residence permits. “The children deserved it,” Governor Beglov explained, “and we’ll suffer
through” (Fontanka 2021a). The evening ended with fireworks, followed by a thunderstorm. Ninety-eight people died from COVID in the city that day; the next day, a hundred and seven people died; three days later, a hundred and ten. Hospital wards overflowed, patients waited in hospital corridors.

Many of my neighbors and friends thought that Governor Beglov’s refusal to cancel the youth day extravaganza was criminal. Waxing poetic about the river Styx across which Charon ferries the dead (Cox 1885: 422), they lamented that every firework salute costs as much as a retiree’s pension, railed at the duplicity of hosting a party for thirty thousand unvaccinated irresponsible teenagers while fining people for not wearing a mask in the metro. Some surmised that the city government had kept the weather ungodly hot, seeding rainclouds lest rain dampen the extravagant show, while the infirm and elderly died of heatstroke in thirty-five-degree weather.

But the theory that I find most horribly sensible concerns rats. There are two oft-told stories about what stopped the rat infestation in Leningrad during the WWII siege: one is that cats were imported from Yaroslavl and Vologda, the other is that a particular species-specific strain of typhus was intentionally spread to the rat population. I don’t know whether this happened; it concerns me here only as a metaphor. The point is: to wage biological warfare on rodents, which rats should you infect? You should infect adolescents because young rats defy the strict territorial and hierarchical rules that stratify mature rats’ worlds. Inquisitive, they penetrate everywhere, and contaminate everyone. By this logic, why host a youth festival on the cusp of a new COVID strain outbreak, even as the Navy Salon recedes behind closed doors? To sicken as many people as possible. Release the pathogen, and you’ll stop the epidemic. Many will die, and that’s fine. Others will survive and birth children with statistically greater immunity.

I stewed over such theories one night in late June 2021, grimly watching the Red Sails festival broadcast with two of my friends. The rats had come up because these friends work with animals: procuring and training all sorts of non-humans for film shoots, resolving social problems with difficult dogs and cats. Andrei came by that evening after a busy day catching street pigeons to release on the set. He talked about having lost both parents to COVID, and we all began counting how many others we’d lost. We tuned into the live broadcast of Youth Day, and it did not seem wholly unreasonable to draw the comparison between teenage revelers and infected rats. The head of the Federal Surveillance Agency, Rospotrebnadzor, would warn us a few weeks later that young people pose the greatest COVID risk because they are the most social (Fontanka 2021b). By then, the city crematorium was unable to keep pace with the death rate. Workers stacked coffins one on top of the other in empty storerooms, and in the continuing heatwave, these coffins started to leak (Klochkova 2021). But the vast majority of those who got sick did not die. And State officials lowered vaccination targets: “collective immunity” indicators were shifted to include not only the vaccinated but also the sick and recovered (Meduza 2021).

In this city where people are regularly killed by falling icicles, state forces disrupt everyday life in strange and unexplained ways. And if theories of intentional contagion have come to seem sensible, this is because Russian governance has itself become increasingly weird. In the winter of 2021, for example,
“they” (Who? Someone.) locked down most of downtown on several occasions: metro stations closed, public transport canceled, traffic over the bridges curtailed, main thoroughfares closed off with snow-clearing trucks. The sieges were presumably a response to the possibility of pro-Navalny protests, but no explanation was officially given. We woke up and read in the city newspaper that the streets were impassable. By evening, we read that the military divisions and snowplows had packed up and left. The following weekend, it happened again. And then again. On one such Saturday, I went downtown and wandered the empty streets for hours. I saw some friends, saw boulevards barricaded by snowplows, and walked home for lack of public transport. I didn’t see any protests. All I saw was a city under martial law (Fig. 1). The city council and the police department passed responsibility off to each other; no one seemed to know whose jurisdiction it was to close down the city (Fontanka 2021c). Absent explanation and visible cause, people speculated that, perhaps, someone in power was practicing a military coup, drilling young policemen to brutalize citizens. Or that, perhaps, Governor Beglov wanted to make himself look good to Putin. Or perhaps Putin really was so irate with the possibility of peaceful street protests in support of Navalny? The police on the streets couldn’t explain why they were there either. They speculated that, perhaps, they were mobilized to prevent a possible terrorist attack. Perhaps. Perhaps we’ll never know. Weeks passed, and life got back to normal. Everyone forgot about the military barricades like they’ll forget about the Red Sails.

Figure 1. Security forces blocking off Nevsky prospekt, 31 January, 2021. Photo by Xenia Cherkaev.
Not everyone is a naysayer. Many of my neighbors like the Red Sails festival. They are proud that St. Petersburg hosts it—the salute, the musical show, the state-sponsored exuberance of youth. Some say that the city has to maintain itself as a tourist attraction: we’ll lose a few thousand to COVID, but we’ll keep that brand status. Others say that COVID was created to crash the economy. Organizations like the World Health Organization “will just pocket the money from one strain and come up with new ones, indefinitely. They should just come out and say that everyone needs to sit in his own little cave, not flying or going anywhere, so the whole world will be just for the elites, so regular people don’t interfere with them.” Nearby these axiomatic assumptions is the idea that Russia is a bastion of sanity in a world run by international power brokers. By this line of reasoning, that winter’s military siege of downtown was made necessary by the threat of Navalny: a meddler Fifth Column of liberal Western influence, seeking to corrupt Russia through the minds of its most precious resource, its youth. Particular objects of blame differ, but the structure of reason remains the same. It supposes a powerful governing body, managing populations for its own particular financial good and even in the face of mass death.

Contesting views of the murderous global elite are not firm positions, and sometimes they overlap. People say, “Damn! Either COVID doesn’t exist, or the government is intentionally killing off young people.” But regardless of which nefarious forces are named, the idea that the rich and powerful are trying to dispense with the rest of us is becoming increasingly commonsensical in late-liberal Russia. And perhaps not only there. In a world where super-billionaires build pleasure vessels to vacation in space while their fellow citizens live on the streets with their children, it’s not odd to surmise that indefinite global elites want us all dead. It needs us only to suppose a plan where we are told to look for spontaneous order (Hayek 1968). And it is comforting, in a way, to imagine that at least there’s somebody in charge.

Acknowledgments
Support from the Basic Research Program of the National Research University Higher School of Economics is gratefully acknowledged. My thanks to Elena Tipikina, Holly Bromley, and Daniel Richards for their insightful comments.

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