

## **The Autocrat's Language**

### **Culture**

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*Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library/Rauner Special Collections*

By Masha Gessen for the New York Review of Books: I had visitors from Moscow the other day, and the conversation, naturally, turned to what all of Moscow seems to be talking about these days: a vast urban renewal project that aims to raze all the five-story apartment buildings constructed during the residential construction push of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The thing is, though, that virtually all of those buildings have long since been demolished. The Moscow project of razing five-story buildings from the 1950s and 1960s will bring down four- and seven-story modernist buildings constructed in the early twentieth century—really, anything that occupies land that may be redeveloped. These buildings are not five-story apartment blocks from the 1950s and 1960s, but they will be classified as such. This is a problem of language. A Russian poet named Sergei Gandlevsky once said that in the late Soviet period he became obsessed with hardware-store nomenclature. He loved the word *secateurs*, for example. Garden shears, that is. *Secateurs* is a great word. It has a shape. It has weight. It has a function. It is not ambiguous. It is also not a hammer, a rake, or a plow. It is not even scissors. In a world where words were constantly used to mean their opposite, being able to call *secateurs* “secateurs”—and nothing else—was freedom. “Freedom,” on the other hand, was, as you know, slavery. That’s Orwell’s 1984. And it is also the USSR, a country that had “laws,” a “constitution,” and even “elections,” also known as the “free expression of citizen will.” The elections, which were mandatory, involved showing up at the so-called polling place, receiving a pre-filled ballot—each office had one name matched to it—and depositing it in the ballot box, out in the open. Again, this was called the “free expression of citizen will.” There was nothing free about it, it did not constitute expression, it had no relationship to citizenship or will because it granted the subject no agency. Calling this ritual either an “election” or the “free expression of citizen will” had a dual effect it eviscerated the words “election,” “free,” “expression,” “citizen,” and “will,” and it also left the thing itself undescribed. When something cannot be described, it does not become a fact of shared reality. Hundreds of millions of Soviet citizens had an experience of the thing that could not be described, but I would argue that they did not share that experience, because they had no language for doing so. At the same time, an experience that could be accurately described as, say, an “election” or “free,” had been preemptively discredited because those words had been used to denote something entirely different. For the complete text of Gessen’s comments, link below:

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/05/13/the-autocrats-language/>