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Reinventing the West: A Cultural Map of Russian Perestroika

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Oral Presentation 1.1

REINVENTING THE WEST: A CULTURAL MAP OF RUSSIAN PERESTROIKA

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My research is an investigation into the roots of change that have shaped the cultural map of Russia. Russian culture has a distinct polarity, existing as two bipolar fields with no neutral zone. With this duality, there is no room for a neutral sphere of life and instead behavior is seen as fitting into one field of existence or another. This is known as the “binary model of Russian culture” as described by Yuri Lotman. The two most extreme periods in Russian cultural history, the time of Peter the Great and Mikhail Gorbachev, are characterized by explicit breaks with the past. Both of these leaders turned to the West as a compass for progress, causing the deepest conflicts of Russian culture to rise to the surface.

The strongest manifestation of binary logic in Russia is its attitude towards the West, creating a radical distinction between what is “ours” and what is “alien.” This binary opposition does not exclude the idea of progress from its cultural vocabulary though and movement towards the future also follows a distinctive cultural map. Every period of Russian history is characterized by a decisive break with the past while, at the same time, there is evidence of repeated events that regenerate the culture of the past. The past is always negated but also rooted in the future.

A dualism exists in the understanding of the nature of cultural change for Russia, dividing the country into two camps: Slavophiles and Westernizers. Slavophiles defend the Russian tradition and believe evil comes from without (the West). They contend that Russia is a morally superior nation. Westernizers oppose this notion of Russia’s higher calling and instead believe that the West should serve as a model of modernization. My research will examine the programs for change of both Peter the Great and Mikhail Gorbachev, demonstrating the similarities in their contributions to the shaping of Russia’s cultural map.