

Chapter 10

BEYOND LIFE ITSELF

THE EMBEDDED FETUSES OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX ANTI-ABORTION ACTIVISM

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In English-language scholarship on the cultural and political lives of the fetus, the ascription of personhood has been a critical focus of analysis. In their edited volume *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*, Lynn Morgan and Meredith Michaels (1999) outline the underlying paradox: new technologies of prenatal visualization, testing, and bonding have made fetuses into increasingly animated subjects with a powerful hold over the imaginations of expectant parents and the larger public. At the same time, pro-life activists mobilize these images to signify powerlessness, defenselessness, and life at its most vulnerable (see also Petchesky 1987; Rapp 2000). In North American pro-life politics, the fetus becomes a kind of *homo sacer*: a figure both sacred and impure because it exists at the limits of collective moral systems, so transgressions against it become transgressions against life itself (Agamben 1998; Arendt 1951). Like stateless refugees who become the motivating center of political action precisely because they represent forms of human life excluded from full political subjecthood, fetal persons are at their most powerful when they embody biological life at its barest.

When cultural anthropologists look at other times and places, however, it becomes clear that the status of “icons of life” does not

come naturally to fetuses (Morgan 2009). During research in the Ecuadorian Andes, Morgan (1998) found that her female interviewees universally proclaimed abortion to be a sin while simultaneously relegating the miscarried fetuses they quite routinely handled to the not-quite-human, semi-wild category of *aucas* that deserved no human burial. For these Catholic women, assent to the Church's condemnation of abortion did not depend on the claim that personhood begins at conception but accommodated "a class of quasi and almost persons that happened to include those not-yet, unborn beings who die in the process of becoming" (Morgan 2009: xiv). Historical research in Russia and Japan has shown that before the second half of the twentieth century, when biomedical advances dramatically lowered the rates of infant death, peasants often used terms that encompassed prenatal losses through miscarriage or abortion and perinatal deaths. The Japanese "water children" (*mizuko*) and Russian "not destined to live in this world" (*ne zhilets na belom svete*) designated beings whose process of becoming was interrupted before or after the end of a pregnancy (LaFleur 1992; Ransel 2000: 186).

In many of such contexts, what anthropologists refer to as "social personhood" (i.e., recognition as a full member of a social group) was only achieved some time after birth, through an initiation ritual such as Christian baptism, Jewish and Muslim circumcision, a name-giving ceremony, or other rites of passage. Based on research on Christian anti-abortion activism in contemporary Russia, this chapter investigates the dilemmas caused by the unstable status of the fetus as a being whose biological, social, and theological meanings do not always add up to one coherent whole. As Russian activists attempt to bring together views of the fetus stemming from Eastern Orthodox theology, Soviet science, and international pro-life discourses, they create a visual and verbalized imaginary of the fetus that is quite different from the North American "icon of life." Fetal imagery from post-Soviet Russia shows how scientific views of the fetus as a biological being are culturally inflected, while theological and political formulations grapple with the biological vulnerability of human engendering.

The sociologist Luc Boltanski (2013: 48–49) speaks of "engendering" as a social process, where a being that has arrived "in the flesh" needs to be affirmed ritually and linguistically in order to be "adopted" as a member of a social group. Adoption usually occurs through the affirmation of the new being by the mother and the wider kin group, allowing the new human being to grow into a role that makes it both a singular individual and someone with a place in

a social system. Abortion always does more than interrupt a biological process; it also interrupts, or refuses to set in motion, a process of social engendering that produces a socially embedded human person. In North America, the movement to politicize abortion has led to a focus on biological, genetically human life as the minimal trait of a rights-bearing subject. By contrast, insisting on the social embeddedness of processes of engendering has been a feminist countermove designed to shift emphasis from the discourse of fetal rights to a more complex consideration of life circumstances that lead to difficult decisions (Ginsburg 1989; Mensch and Freeman 1993; Parsons 2010).

But not all anti-abortion movements focus on biological life, and not all arguments for embeddedness advance a feminist agenda. Orthodox Christian activists in twenty-first-century Russia willingly adapt materials and approaches from the Western pro-life movement. They even use discourses of human life beginning at conception to counter evolutionist understandings of fetal development that had been prevalent during Soviet times. At the same time, these activists have theological reservations against ascribing individual personhood to unbaptized fetuses. Rather, they value them for their protosocial qualities, embedding them as potential members in kinship and national groups. In their view, the problem with abortion is less that it violates the individual right to life but rather that it prevents a conceived child from assuming full membership in collectives already under siege. In Russian reproductive politics, fetuses do not embody the pure potential of life itself but are akin to the ancestral remains whose reinvigorated role in postsocialist politics was analyzed by Katherine Verdery (1999). Like the remains of adult victims of socialist regimes, aborted fetuses are assumed to have interrupted biographical trajectories (potentials for biological development and social identity) that connect them to kin and national groups. Like dead ancestors, dead offspring can become a relatively risk-free focus for mourning the lost vitality of a social group, unable to criticize or resist attempts to shape its future. They thus become good candidates for animation in the name of particular political projects, lending strength to visions of what makes a morally good society and what endangers it.

Russia and Abortion

Post-Soviet Russia provides a distinctive arena for the study of abortion politics, because it combines a long-term practice and relatively

wide acceptance of the procedure with recent attempts to make it more controversial and impose restrictions. Some of the differences between North American and Russian pro-life views of the fetus lie in the fact that direct experience of abortion is far more widespread in Russia than in many other parts of the world. Legalized in 1920 and then again in 1955 (after a period of severe restrictions on elective abortions under Joseph Stalin), abortion was *the* method of fertility control for postwar Soviet generations. Barrier methods of contraception such as condoms and cervical caps were always in short supply and unpopular with the population, while hormonal contraceptives (“the pill”) were never produced in the Soviet Union. Importing the pill was prohibited after a brief period in the early 1970s, because of concerns with the side effects of this early generation of the medication. Surgical abortions, by contrast, were available in the gynecological wards of maternity clinics (*roddoma*, literally “birth houses”) and quickly became the principal procedure performed there. At their peak in 1965, abortions outnumbered live births almost three to one, and having multiple abortions across a reproductive life-span remained the norm for Soviet women in the 1970s and 80s (Luehrmann 2017; Zdravomyslova 2009).

Though there has been a gradual decrease since the mid-1990s, it was only around 2008 that there were fewer abortions than live births. Hovering at around five hundred per thousand live births, the abortion ratio remains significantly higher than in North America, where it is around three hundred. In Soviet as in post-Soviet times, married and mature women often use abortion as a spacing mechanism. The typical at-risk fetus that becomes an object of activist concern is not necessarily the offspring of a teen mother but rather a second or third sibling whose progenitors think they are not able to increase their family size (Denisov et al. 2012; Sakevich 2009).

In addition to being far more a part of mainstream female experience than in North America, abortion from Soviet times onward was framed more as a problem of demographic responsibility than of sexual morality. These demographic concerns explain why abortion retained the official status of an evil to be fought against although it was legal and widely practiced throughout much of Soviet history. The prohibition of elective abortions between 1936 and 1955 was mainly an attempt to increase the birth rate, shown by the fact that the struggle against illegal abortion intensified in the late 1940s and early 1950s, accompanied by increased attention to preventing infant deaths and supporting unwed mothers. All these measures

were framed as means of “replacing the dead” of World War II, in which twenty million Soviet citizens perished (Nakachi 2008; Randall 2011). After restrictions were lifted under Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, the skyrocketing rates of abortion raised public concern not as part of a discourse on declining sexual mores but in connection with debates about the quantity and quality of the population as well as women’s struggles to combine traditional caregiving roles with the expectation that they become part of the socialist work force (Field 2007; cf. Andaya 2014). The rise of the “one-child family” became a publicly debated issue, and scholars and planners voiced civilizationist concerns because birthrates in the Asian parts of the Soviet Union were higher than in the European ones. During the social and political opening of perestroika and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these concerns turned into a full-fledged panic about “demographic crisis,” because further decreases in births and a dramatic decline in life expectancy especially for men led to negative population growth (Parsons 2014; Rivkin-Fish 2006). Amid fears about the extinction of the Russian nation, aborted fetuses appear less as individuals deprived of their rights and more as large numbers of missing citizens whose lives could have replenished the nation had they not ended in utero.

Post-Soviet Russia has not seen the dramatic changes in abortion legislation of such postsocialist states as Poland, which passed from permissive legislation to almost complete prohibition, and Romania, which lifted the severe and punitive restrictions imposed by the pronatalist socialist state (Kligman 1998; Zielinska 2000). First-trimester abortion remains available on demand and free if performed at a state health clinic. After the first trimester, abortions are performed for medical and a small number of social indications. But since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the strengthening public presence of the Russian Orthodox Church and increased contacts with international Christian activism have led to the emergence of a pro-life movement largely driven by Orthodox Christians. In terms of influencing legislation, the movement’s successes have been limited, though not insignificant. Over the years, the list of admissible social indications for a second- or third-trimester abortion has been reduced to just three: rape, incest, and incarceration of the mother. Since the fall of 2011, new legislation requires a mandatory waiting period of one week between the time when a pregnant woman requests an abortion and the earliest date when it can be carried out., During this time, the pregnant woman must attend a counseling session with a psychologist employed by the health clinic (Rivkin-Fish 2013).

More importantly, perhaps, the movement has taken on new institutional contours, influenced by a turn toward state-backed pronatalism under President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill's policy of standardizing the social outreach activities of the Church (Chandler 2013; Stoeckl 2014). What began in the 1990s and 2000s as small groups formed around individual activist priests who referred to themselves by the Anglicism *prolaif* is turning into a network of "centers for the defense of the family." The work of such centers typically includes counseling services for pregnant women and material help to single mothers and large families, as well as sometimes marriage counseling and classes for parents and children.

Between 2008 and 2014, I visited centers and conducted interviews with lay and ordained Orthodox activists in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the regional capitals of Kazan, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Kirov. As an ethnographer who participated in the organizations' day-to-day outreach activities, I was able to see the networks of people and motivations behind policy shifts. Through formally solicited "procreation stories" (Ginsburg 1989) and casual conversations, I realized that many of the activists had themselves experienced abortion and were parents to living offspring. When remembering aborted fetuses, they were often saying as much about their actual and wished-for families as about the abstract rights and wrongs of abortion (Luehrmann 2017). At the same time, they were engaging with the shifting discursive framework provided by church and secular media, which increasingly emphasized the relational and social rather than the individual and biological potentials of fetuses.

Since 2012, every diocese is required to designate a priest who coordinates work to encourage child bearing and family life, and in 2013 a Patriarchal Commission on the Family and the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood was created to collect information on regional activities and offer training and outreach materials while serving as a voice for the moral vision of the Church (Patriarshaia Komissiiia 2014). The commission is headed by Archpriest Dmitrii Smirnov, a married parish priest who began raising the issue of abortion and rights of families with many children in the late 1980s and co-founded the Moscow organization Life Center (Tsentri Zhizn') in 1993. His move from director of the Life Center (an organization that still exists but is now run out of the offices of the commission) to chair of a commission that identifies "family," "motherhood," and "childhood" as its key areas of concern is symptomatic of a larger shift away from a focus on biological life. Russian activists who embrace this shift also see it as a move to gain independence from the

model of North American pro-life activism. As Sergei, the organizer of a yearly festival of pro-life initiatives that still bears the name “For Life” (*Za Zhizn’*) but increasingly focuses on promoting family-oriented moral frameworks, explained in an interview (February 2012):

Western pro-life, American pro-life, they consider the highest value to be life from conception to natural death, yes? ... We talked about it and decided that for us, the value is eternal life. That a person is saved in eternal life is more important than that he lives here. So that means that life, well, it can happen the other way round, that we save a child, and he will live in this world, and then a pedophile comes along and kills that child’s soul.... So we started the movement as pro-life, defense of children, but we found that we can’t do anything without defending the family so that it can protect children from the temptations of the contemporary world.

In Sergei’s analysis and that of activist clergy I met at his festival, the Western pro-life movement’s focus on biological life as an absolute value was a pragmatic strategy for creating an interreligious coalition in the context of North American multiculturalism. They found that the search for secular and interdenominational partners required Christian organizations to disregard aspects of their traditions in which the value of biological life was subordinate to the eternal fate of the soul, as in ideas about martyrdom, for example. The wish to hold on to a substantive vision of what gave value to human life was a reason the Russian festival welcomed Catholic speakers from Poland, Finland, and other parts of Eastern Europe but did not allow non-Orthodox organizations to compete for festival prizes or participate in joint protest or outreach.

The image of the fetus that emerges from this shift from biological organism to social fabric is complex. As a bearer of “eternal life,” a human in utero is less an image of biological perfection whose survival must be promoted at all cost and more a potential that can develop into negative as well as positive directions. Bringing the fetus to a live birth is not enough, because the child that is born is also in need of protection from “pedophiles” (a term widely used in Russia as a derogatory term for homosexuals) and other modern temptations. While Danish in vitro fertilization (IVF) patients asked to donate embryos for stem cell research find it possible to see them as blank figures with potential as biological resources (Svendsen 2011), Russian Orthodox activists insist that an embryo or a fetus is never a biological tabula rasa. Rather, it is a moral entity whose life can

take right or wrong turns and who needs a social framing to direct it. Both discourses see the developing human being as a figure of potential, but they have different degrees of openness about how that potential can be realized. If the discarded IVF embryo, “although not yet anything, had the ability to become everything in the future” (Svendsen 2011: 423), the fetus Sergei hoped to save from abortion was already “someone”—a being endowed with a soul. Neither a tabula rasa nor completed at the time of birth, the soul’s developmental trajectory connected pre- and postnatal periods and required a specific social environment to unfold in the desired direction.¹ This ideal social environment was imagined in kin and national terms. However, membership in both collectives was not automatic but depended on particular rituals of initiation.

Quasi-Personhood and Protosocial Beings

In this neotraditionalist discourse, fetal personhood mattered but not in the biologist framework familiar from North American debates. One aim of activists in various cities was to establish psychological consultations in the municipal gynecological clinics that gave referrals for surgical abortions. By agreement with the directors of select clinics, Orthodox organizations in Saint Petersburg, Kazan, and other cities paid their own psychologist to hold consultations several times a week to which, ideally, all women presenting for an elective abortion should be referred. While many of these arrangements preceded the legal requirement for a psychological consultation, in some cases the Orthodox psychologist took on the role of providing the mandatory consultations because not every clinic had its own psychologist on staff.

In their approaches, the Orthodox psychologists I spoke to drew on internationally circulating discourses of fetal personhood but gave them specific post-Soviet inflections. They used little plastic models of “preborn” fetuses at various ages of gestation that were originally introduced to Russia by North American pro-life activists but were mainly Russian-made at the time of my fieldwork. Representing life-sized fetuses that can somehow exist and be handled outside of a pregnant woman’s body, these models are artifacts of biologicistic thinking that can easily be appropriated for relational ends. One psychologist in Kazan told me she encouraged pregnant women to hold one of these dolls during the conversation, wrap it in little swaddling cloths, and put it in a miniature bassinette. She saw

these interactions as a natural supplement to showing a brochure with in utero photographs of embryonic and fetal development, both intended to “activate maternal feelings” and make clear that “there is already a person there” (*tam uzhe est' chelovek*). But she and her colleagues also acknowledged that information about human development was not always enough to deter someone from having an abortion. In the 1990s, a longtime Moscow activist explained, one could go into an auditorium and show pictures of fetal development, and people would cry and be shocked. Today’s young people know everything, and still have abortions, because “their hearts are hardened.”

The idea that “there is a person there” was more surprising in the 1990s because Soviet textbooks taught a theory of embryonic development going back to the German evolutionist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), who posited that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, and an embryo in utero goes through evolutionary stages resembling various kinds of animals. Haeckel’s theories, which popularized Darwinism in much of Central and Eastern Europe, were officially promoted in the Soviet Union because his drawings of fetal development visualized processes of evolution and supported the materialist point of view that no absolute divide existed between human and animal life (Polianski 2012). Several older women reported being influenced by this view in their Soviet-era decisions to abort. “According to Haeckel’s teachings, there wasn’t a human there, but a fish or a frog—it meant nothing to get rid of it,” recalled Valentina (born in 1937), the director of the Saint Petersburg branch of the Life Center. Like many ideas embedded in Soviet-era visual imaginaries, Haeckel’s theory of recapitulation still had a place in early twenty-first-century Russian life, for example, in displays at the Saint Petersburg Museum of Zoology that remained unchanged since the fall of the USSR.

For post-Soviet activists, the materialist view of the fetus as a fish or amphibian represented a burden from the past that needed to be overcome, but the more humanist side of socialist discourses about the fetus was less marked as “Soviet.” Expressed in medical literature and poetry, socialist humanist discourse on the fetus as a potential member of human collectives serves as one of the sources for how post-Soviet activists frame the harm done by abortion. In Soviet medical literature, the high rates of abortion were treated as a health concern for women, both in terms of physical risks of infection and secondary infertility and mental risks of going against natural maternal feelings. Although the fetus as a rights-bearing in-

dividual did not enter Soviet humanism, it was represented as a relational being offering fulfillment to its parents and potential talents that could be of service to society. In a poem I first saw on a sticker distributed by the Life Center, but later found in a Soviet women's health guide from 1965, author Irina Bychenkova asked pregnant woman considering an abortion to "stop to think!" Perhaps, the poem suggests, the one "whose life now hangs on a thin thread, / will turn out to be a scholar or a poet, / and the whole world will speak of him." Although they would deny the implication that only future scholars and poets have a right to survive, post-Soviet anti-abortion activists eagerly embrace the notion of genetic destiny, claiming that everything is already determined (*zalozheno*) in the zygote, from the color of someone's eyes to a love of flowers. The branches of the Life Center and affiliated organizations prominently display a memorandum signed by two embryologists at Moscow State University (Russia's oldest university and one of its most prestigious research institutions). On letterhead depicting the university's distinctive Stalin-era central high-rise, they state that "the life of a human being as a biological individual" begins at conception and that the zygote cannot be considered part of the mother's organism (Golichenkov and Popov n.d.).²

Engagement with Soviet discourses thus pushes post-Soviet activists toward biologizing languages of life as an unchanging base of personhood and human worth, both in order to refute particular evolutionist understandings and because they translate an older European discourse of genius and innate talents. But Russian Orthodox theology and practice add complexity by emphasizing social personhood rather than biological engendering. Here, it is baptism, performed forty days after the birth according to Church canons, that confers a name on a newborn and adopts it into the community. By being named after a saint, the infant obtains a spiritual protector and can be included in communal prayers. The infant also receives godparents, aiding in the building of social connections for the family (Herzfeld 1990; Hirschon 2010). The forty days before baptism compose a period when, in rural Russia, both mother and infant were considered in a liminal state in which excessive social contacts could be dangerous for themselves and for visitors. Well into the Soviet period, mothers continued to limit the social exposure of their infants and to seek the cleansing power of the Orthodox churching prayer (*votserkovlenie*) to end their period of relative seclusion (Ransel 2000). Post-Soviet Russian families still practice the celebration of "showing" their infant to neighbors and relatives just before baptism, and

Orthodox families refrain from referring to their infant by name before the baptism, even if they may have picked one.

In this context, a social practice shaped by the theology of baptism and relatively recent experiences of frequent neonatal death³ stands in tension with the affirmation of life beginning at conception, suggesting a more complex, gradual process of becoming in which neither conception nor birth are decisive events on their own. Both fetuses and newborns are treated as protosocial beings expected to take on a place in a community but who only slowly emerge from relative isolation and ambiguity into full adoption into a socially recognized position.

Fetuses Represented: Unchaste and Chaste Depictions

The sense that focusing on the fetus as a biological entity can be effective but ultimately fails to do justice to its moral status also comes up in visual depictions of fetuses in Russia. Activists were aware of the imagery of “hard pro-life” that comes to mind when thinking of anti-abortion protests internationally: photographs of bloody, aborted fetuses in grotesquely twisted poses. The organization Warriors of Life, made up mainly of university students and other young adults, uses this imagery for signs at demonstrations and “solitary pickets.” For a solitary picket, people handing out fliers or displaying signs stand alone or at least fifty meters apart from other activists, and are thereby exempt from requiring a demonstration permit. The photographs of mangled fetuses mainly come from the United States, recognizable by the nickel and dime coins often placed next to the fetal remains to indicate their minuscule size and to hint that they died for somebody’s profit. Dmitrii, a leader of the organization in Saint Petersburg, told me that in the United States, “hard pro-life” forced abortion clinics to close and prevented abortion services from being advertised. “It’s a proven method,” he said. This organization was also vocally opposed to the Russian laws that kept abortion legal, and unwilling to cooperate with any medical institution that offered the procedure. Organizations that focused on collaborating with medical and governmental institutions to set up counseling sessions for pregnant women criticized such confrontational tactics as ineffective, but also had specific concerns about the Warriors’ use of bloody imagery.

Iuliia, a psychologist paid by an Orthodox organization to hold consultation sessions in maternity clinics in Kazan, said she would show the “hard” pictures to a male audience but not to pregnant

women: “I would show it to young men, to shock them, so that they see what abortion is. Often they cannot hear in any other way.” Women, however, were more receptive to positive imagery, which could “activate their maternal instinct” (*podkliuchit’ materinskii instinkt*). Pictures of living babies and dolls representing living fetuses were more suitable for that. Svetlana, a counselor who worked with pregnant women in Moscow in face-to-face and telephone consultations, also commented on the ambiguity of fetal pictures, both those taken in utero and post-abortion. In particular, she was against showing such pictures to children: “It is not for nothing that these processes [of fetal development] are hidden from our eyes. Sometimes one could really look and see an animal there. Some kind of chastity (*tselomudrie*) is violated.”

The idea of chastity as keeping certain things shrouded in secret speaks to the need to analyze practices of visualizing fetuses in relation to other culturally relevant imagery and related ethical concepts (Harris et al. 2004; Petchesky 1987). A Slavonic calque on the term *sophrosyne* (whole mind) from the Greek New Testament, the term *tselomudrie* refers to the same virtue as the Latin-derived chastity (Latin *castus*, pure). But rather than focusing on sexual restraint, the Greek etymology points to a wider concern with keeping thoughts pure from preoccupations that might be distressing, disturbing, or inappropriate to a particular stage of development. Orthodox educators and media critics often speak of protecting the *tselomudrie* of children, which means limiting their exposure to depictions of sex, nudity, and same-sex relationships but also to violent, frightening, or otherwise distressing content (Medvedeva and Shishova 2012). The frightening or strange-looking fetus disrupts trust in the reliable “humanness” of human beings, and perhaps also in the happy outcomes of pregnancies. During a picket by the Warriors of Life outside a gynecological clinic in Saint Petersburg, several passersby commented that if a pregnant woman saw the photographs of aborted fetuses, she might have a miscarriage.

Misgivings about the efficacy and ethics of some of the standard international pro-life imagery notwithstanding, the Russian anti-abortion movement has produced a rich array of visual media. Most notably, fetuses tend to be depicted not as fetuses but as future projections of what they might turn into, depending on the choice their pregnant mother makes. In keeping with the idea of chastity as preserving the mystery of hidden things, Orthodox artists and designers often respect the opacity of a pregnant woman’s uterus and attempt instead to see into the postpregnancy future. In such depictions, fe-

tuses appear as growing children, spectral presences, or both at the same time. A church-sponsored advertisement posted on the streets of Nizhnii Novgorod in 2012 (fig. 10.1) featured a black-and-white photograph of a child of three to four years old, shot in profile looking up with a worried expression, with the caption: “Mom, don’t have an abortion! I will always do as you say, promise!”



FIGURE 10.1. “Mom, don’t have an abortion: I will always do as you say!” Poster commissioned by the Russian Orthodox diocese of Nizhnii Novgorod, 2012 (Photograph by Sonja Luehrmann).

The poster played on the oft-repeated pro-life argument that no one would kill their toddler or preschooler for some of the social reasons given for abortions—lack of time and money, lack of living space, or fear of the difficulty of bringing up another child. The white-on-black writing on the poster evoked the optic of public health warnings against smoking tobacco that were visible elsewhere in Russian cities. The depiction thus deliberately mixed visual codes for referring to children before and after birth and to health concerns relating to unborn and born children and adults, refusing to differentiate between the ethics of caring for a fetus and the ethics of caring for a young child (Casper 1999). At the same time, the white light falling on the child's face evoked the fetal ghost who was one possible outcome of the decision the interpellated pregnant woman was in the process of making.

Less ambiguous depictions of the aborted fetus as a ghost returning to haunt its mother were common in depictions intended for an internal, churched or near-churched audience. A poster hanging in the psychologist's office at the Saint Petersburg crisis pregnancy center represented, "The life of a woman who has a child and one who has an abortion" through a series of graphic-novel style images (Luehrmann 2017: 108). In one image, the aborted child appears to the sleeping woman in a dream, depicted as a baby in white swaddling cloths. More spectral fetuses appear on the digital image *Two Mothers (Dve mamy)* by computer artist Boris Zabolotskii, which won the grand prize of the annual pro-life festival in 2010.⁴ On the right, a woman in a skirt and headscarf exits the gates of a churchyard accompanied by four children, ranging from a baby in a stroller to a girl of eight to ten years. Behind her we see an Orthodox church and the tower of Moscow State University. On the left, a tall, thin young woman wearing tight jeans and a T-shirt with the English phrase "Sex in the City" stands next to a sports car whose license plate says, also in English, "I ♥ MYSELF." Inside the car are four shadowy silhouettes matching the other woman's four children in size and outline. The car is surrounded by attributes of Western infiltration: post-Soviet steel-and-glass architecture, advertisements for Coca-Cola and Pepsi, a McDonald's restaurant, and a "center of family planning." The graffiti *Proekt Rossiia* (project Russia) on a wall refers to a common claim that birth control and family planning are being promoted in Russia by Western interests intent on reducing Russia's population and gaining control of its natural resources (Leykin 2013; Sperling 2014).

The stakes of reproductive decisions are set high in this image and play out on a national scale rather than as a universal struggle over the sanctity of life as such. The title implies that the woman on the left is also a mother to her aborted fetuses, whose shadows form a group of siblings structured by birth order. Both women are situated in a larger visual field divided between benign Russian culture (framed as a harmonious combination of religion and science) and sinister, threatening “global” or “Western” forces that seek to destroy it. In 2010 when the image was first created, activists still recognized the limited appeal of its explicit brand of Orthodox nationalism. During a discussion at the Saint Petersburg Life Center, staff decided not to use *Two Mothers* on a flyer to hand out during a public event that summer, because “non-Orthodox people won’t understand it.” However, with the unfolding violence in Ukraine over the course of 2014, the message of the Western threat gained ever more traction in Russia. Putin stated in a December 2014 press conference that the West was not really after Ukraine but Siberian resources (President of Russia 2014), and a New Year’s message on the Pro-Life Festival listserv explained that since the outbreak of violence in eastern Ukraine, “we felt that many around us now understand better the meaning of our message, the purpose of our work.”

For more general audiences, the Life Center and other organizations continue to avoid imagery of the spectral fetus and of implied enemies, instead focusing on living children and happy families. A series of social advertisements first placed in the Moscow subway in 2008 was designed to convey that having three children is not an excessive burden to be combatted by abortion but rather a good thing. The imagery represents both children and parents through objects, accompanied by the slogan “Congratulations on the addition [to the family]!” (*S popolneniem!*): a third child’s toothbrush is added to a cup with two adult’ and two children’s brushes, number four of a series of Russian nesting dolls opens up to reveal a fifth one, and so on. Similar to the image of the spectral family, these images portray the unborn as always already part of a collective; rather than from life itself, they derive value from “filling up” (the literal meaning of the word *popolnenie*) the existing kin group and strengthening Russia’s future.

Compared to the fetal photography that has such a prominent place in Western abortion politics, one could say that the projection into the future of fetal imagery in the Russian Orthodox movement treats fetuses less as pure potential than as bodies subject to polit-

ical animation, similar to the “lively politics around dead bodies” discussed by Verdery (1999: 23). Like the dead bodies of known and unknown adults, fetuses present the impression of a singular agent but are open to multiple projections of other people’s agency. They do not speak for themselves, but words and thoughts can be attributed to them, as in the “Diary of an Unborn Child” or the Nizhni Novgorod poster. The ambiguity of a dead body comes from the “complex behavior subject to much debate” that is part of actually lived biographies, while the affective power of dead body politics is fueled by notions of kinship obligations and their connections to ideas about cosmic order (Verdery 1999: 28). Living or dead fetuses can be animated through the imaginative work of endowing them with a future biography and inserting them into networks of mutual kin obligations. In these ways, fetal imagery in post-Soviet Russia shows the link between the new reproductive legislation instituted by many postsocialist states (Chandler 2013; Gal and Kligman 2000) and the simultaneous flurry of reburials and posthumous rehabilitations that were part of the reformulation of historical narratives. By focusing simultaneously on ancestors and offspring, the political community rethinks its moral fabric through animating beings on its edges with the qualities desired for its members: loyalty, reliability, and irrepressible vitality.

The visual and liturgical symbol the Orthodox anti-abortion movement has chosen for public commemorations also takes up a narrative of violence in a stylized and aestheticized form, preserving the chastity of viewers. Since the early 1990s, the Life Center in Moscow has marked 11 January, the day the Church commemorates the “14,000 Holy Innocent Infants of Bethlehem in Judah, killed by Herod,” as a day to commemorate and express opposition to abortion. Catholic tradition calls this episode the Slaughter of the Innocents, and it refers to the gospel narrative of King Herod ordering the killing of all children under two in the attempt to kill the newborn Jesus.⁵

In the process of creating this ritual commemoration of abortion, the Life Center commissioned an icon depicting the Holy Innocents, a subject previously depicted only as a *kleimo*, a small image in the frame of icons of the Nativity of Christ (fig. 10.2).

In conformity with the classical iconographic style, scenes of murder are relegated to the background, while the small figures in the center stand unharmed, identified as martyrs only by the crosses they hold and the red background. By depicting aborted fetuses as a large group of child victims, the icon once again crosses



FIGURE 10.2. Icon of the Holy Innocent Infants of Bethlehem, Moscow (Photograph by Sonja Luehrmann).

the divide between prenatal and postnatal development. It also puts blame on the state as a perpetrator of abortion, reframing a common Soviet experience—having an abortion in the interest of delaying or spacing childbirth—as a condition of complicity or victimhood in a program of government-sanctioned murder. By stylizing the violence and focusing attention on the inviolate bodies of saintly figures, the icon becomes available for uses that focus less on past abortions than on the present and future vitality of the nation. In many churches, it is used for prayers against infertility and for the support of families. When talking about the decision of the Russian

movement not to focus on biological life as an ethical goal, festival organizer Sergei used the infants of Bethlehem as one example of the overriding importance of the eternal life of the soul. He said if they had lived, some of these Jewish children may have participated in the crucifixion of Christ and thereby condemned themselves to eternal damnation.

Reanimating Past Decisions

Focused on Russia's future as their movement appears to be, the specters of past fetuses have a very personal significance for many pro-life activists. Some staff members and volunteers who offer aid to pregnant women and participate in anti-abortion rallies are women of a generation that knows abortion from personal experience. For them, advocating against abortion is a way of expiating their own past reproductive decisions that they now conceptualize as sin. The director of the Saint Petersburg Life Center, for example, was a woman in her seventies who had terminated three pregnancies in the 1960s and '70s as a spacing mechanism between giving birth to three living children. The director of another center had come to church activism through involvement in a voluntary movement that visited children in an orphanage, an oft-recommended penance for abortions. The spectral fetuses of these women were often quite personal and concrete, and showed how the fetus became a field for projection of the family life they might have had. Several interviewees who only had sons speculated that the last pregnancy they terminated might have resulted in the birth of a daughter and wondered what old age might be like with the support of a daughter rather than sons and daughters-in-law. A woman who had only one child because of her job as a railroad conductor speculated what a more settled family life would have been like. Taking dead fetuses and reproductive mishap as objects of speculation about alternative life trajectories is also common in North American narratives of abortion and pregnancy loss (Ginsburg 1989; Layne 2003). But theological reservations against personifying the unbaptized and political discourses of demographic decline posed special problems for these women, pushing them away from their own alternative biographies toward wider social outreach.

Russian Orthodox priests who hear confessions often recommend that the penitent focus on cultivating a counteracting virtue. In the context of demographic anxiety, lay women as well as priests

thought that the counterbalancing virtue for ending the life of a fetus was supporting the collective lives of young children and their families: visiting orphanages, giving financial support to a struggling family, or upholding “traditional family values” against perceived threats such as same-sex marriage, LGBT adoption, or government interference with child raising. These activities drew attention away from an aborted fetus to living members of the community that this fetus was not able to join. The book of fictional stories *Pustyje Pesoch-nitsy* (Empty sandboxes) (Fesenko 2011) sold in many church shops and freely distributed by activist groups in print and online linked individual reproductive decisions to the national demographic problem and the traumatic transition period of the 1990s. At that time, the birth rate was so low that many children’s playgrounds were allowed to decay and schools and preschools were converted to other uses.

One thing these women could not do was treat their aborted fetuses as persons in the sense of full members of the Church. North American religious groups sometimes allow retroactive namings of children who died in utero or before baptism; the Japanese *mizuko* cult involves couples purchasing a Buddhist mortuary name for their aborted fetus and erecting a small statue of the bodhisattva in the fetus’s memory (Hardacre 1997; LaFleur 1992). In Russia, priests categorically denied namings of aborted children and uncanonical rites for their posthumous baptism, although I met women who had engaged in both. One woman claimed that posthumous baptism (according to a rite that the Virgin Mary revealed to a nun in the 1950s) turned the aborted fetus from “a bloody demon” into a full-term, healthy baby waiting for its mother in heaven.

While these clandestine rituals reveal an interest in turning the spectral fetus into a regular dead relative, the main theological objection to such ritual personifications lies in the fact that baptism can only be bestowed on a living person, and only those with baptismal names are members of the Church who can be included in corporate prayers. Officially recommended prayers for aborted fetuses are reserved for “solitary recitation” (*dlia keleinogo chteniia*). The only official rite that can be used to acknowledge abortion or any other kind of prenatal death is one for the “churching” (return into the liturgical community) of a woman after an unintentional miscarriage, which forces her to express repentance for the potential sins that led to the inauspicious outcome of the pregnancy (Kizenko 2013). Not having made it into full Church membership, the fetus as a proto-social being can only be remembered in the privacy of the family. At

the same time, church kiosks sell brochures and prayer texts calling for repentance for abortions, presenting the issue as one of collective importance. Precisely because they have no fixed public identity, the spectral presences of aborted fetuses can animate projects that connect very personal doubts, regrets, and speculations to wider diagnoses of where society took a wrong turn.

Conclusion: Fetuses and Life Courses

In Russia and elsewhere, politicizations of abortion show the intimate connection between the problems posed by birth and death for maintaining and reconstituting social orders: the capacity of aborted fetuses to combine future potential, social relatedness, and death and destruction in one symbol with deeply private as well as public appeal makes them the ultimate dead bodies of a postsocialist politics of restoration. For a comparative anthropology of fetuses, the Russian example points to the cultural construction of boundaries and continuities between fetuses, neonates, and stages of human life cycles as a crucial area of inquiry.

Religious traditions play crucial roles in determining points of transition, necessary rites of passage, and what counts as a human life worth living (Inhorn and Tremayne 2012). But demographic histories and political traditions are no less important, as are standards of medical care and experiences of lived (in)security. As Morgan (1999) found out, Ecuadorian Catholics and North American Catholics differ in the weight they place on issues of fetal personhood for determining the moral status of abortion. Russian Orthodox anti-abortion activists, for their part, tend to be respectful observers of the North American movement, which they perceive to be far more powerful and influential than their own. They take assertions of fetal personhood seriously and use them as correctives to Soviet views of fetuses as representing prior stages of human evolution. At the same time, they see post-Soviet Russia as a place where the fabric of the social is threatened by economic and moral decline and threats from outside. In this context, fetuses are not so much embodiments of universal and individualizable biological life, but rather represent society's smallest building blocks, whose vulnerability magnifies the vulnerability of the whole edifice. In a political setting where discourses of individual rights are contested and far from hegemonic even when applied to adults, ideas of the social embeddedness of unborn children become a dominant discourse that imposes its own

normative goals on pregnant women, postmenopausal women, and actual and imagined children (Rivkin-Fish 2013).

One may see this emphasis on fetal embeddedness as residual collectivism, left over from socialism or the peasant village. Or one may see it as a reinterpretation of authoritative bioscientific knowledge in a context where “the politics of life itself,” conceptualized by Nikolas Rose (2006) as an increasing focus on the quality rather than quantity of human organisms, competes with the legacy of immense population losses through Russia’s twentieth century. Fetuses become objects of public concern because of their insufficient numbers, and rather than improving biological organisms, the goal of reproductive activism is to improve the family units that are supposed to raise morally healthy and plentiful offspring. Anthropologists of the fetus will find themselves sympathizing with the Russian activists’ insistence on the social contexts without which there can be no human reproduction in either a biological or a cultural sense. Where activists seek to construct the one moral framework in which they claim all fetuses could thrive, anthropologists do well to note how fetuses trouble cultural and political projects at the same time as they can be mobilized to support them. Human and not quite human, disturbing at the same time as appealing, standing for life in a way that emphasizes its close neighborhood to death, fetuses are creatures whose images, however carefully managed, continually undermine the causes to which they summon their viewers.

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Notes

1. On the continuous malleability of souls across the life course in the Russian imagination, see Pesmen 2000.
2. The idea of a genetically determined love of flowers is expressed in the text “Diary of an Unborn Child” originating in the North American pro-life culture of the 1980s, a Russian translation of which circulates on fliers and in the Russian blogosphere.
3. Cf. Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s (1992) descriptions of deferred emotional investment in infants among residents of Brazilian favelas who cannot take survival of their children for granted.
4. The image can be viewed on the artist’s website at <http://www.bzab.ru/tvorchestvo/za-zhizn-i-semyu/nggallery/image/11-3> (accessed 23 April 2017).
5. The link between the Holy Innocents and abortion has precedents in mid-twentieth-century Catholicism (Stycos 1965), but an iconographer and a priest I interviewed separately at the Life Center recalled no knowledge of this parallel but said they “naturally” settled on the story of murdered children as symbols of aborted fetuses.

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