

Title: Geologic Time, Radioactive Half- Life: Long Temporalities in Russian and American Nuclear Fiction

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Abstract:

While the starting point of the Anthropocene is as yet still drawn in pencil, some scientists have suggested that fallout from the first test of a nuclear weapon marks its beginning. Regardless of the historical point at which humans began to irreversibly transform the planet, the creation of nuclear weapons typifies an era of global ecological disaster, destructive and far-reaching weapons technologies and the consequent recognition of a new timescale for human action and environmental influence. If the nuclear weapon introduced a new scale of physical destruction into the cultural imagination, then its by-product, radioactive waste, presents a greater-than-human timescale to be reckoned with and, this paper argues, for the literary text to incorporate.

This paper examines two novels, one from each of the original arms race adversaries, Vladimir Sorokin's 1999 novel, *Goluboe salo*, and Don DeLillo's 1997 *Underworld*. Each text deploys an innovative chronotope to account for man-made substances that defy and outlast historical time. *Goluboe salo* transgresses the distinctions between science fiction, dystopia, parody and alternate history in its depiction of a substance that disobeys the laws of thermodynamics. This substance is sent from the distant future to an alternate past, where it is examined by real-life nuclear physicists such as Andrei Sakharov. DeLillo's *Underworld* operates within an entirely different mode with its naturalistic depiction of American life under the threat of the bomb. Yet the novel deals extensively with the motif and narrative problem of nuclear by-product, depicting the arms race and its resultant nuclear waste through a sequence of waste-related metaphors and historically-rooted plots throughout the period of the Cold War.

Through a comparative approach to the Russian and American contemporary novel, this paper explores the shared transnational effects of nuclear by-products and radioactive waste on narrative form.