

Title: Leaps of the Imagination: The *Poprygunchiki* as a Case Study in Criminal Creativity
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Abstract:

During the early revolutionary period, a band of thieves known as *poprygunchiki* (“jumpers”) who used costumes and props to masquerade as supernatural beings terrorized urban dwellers in Petrograd (with imitators in Moscow as well). These thieves’ uniquely theatrical modus operandi captured the popular imagination, giving rise to numerous stories that circulated about them both prior to and following their arrest. In Putin’s Russia, the jumpers’ combination of artistry and crime made a comeback in the performances of the art group Voina, who practiced theft and deployed shock tactics in public spaces, sometimes even dressing up as the dead. This talk will examine documentary evidence of the crimes and punishment of the *poprygunchiki*, a topic that has received little scholarly attention, as well as the traces that they have left in Russian literary texts, film, and urban folklore. For contextualization, I will compare representations of the jumpers with those of legendary outlaws of the early revolutionary period such as Len’ka Panteleev. My analysis will seek to explain the popular appeal of the jumpers as well as what their depiction in cultural texts suggests about the shifting definitions of criminality in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. I will compare official definitions of crime in the early Soviet period with unofficial, grassroots definitions emerging from cultural texts. The jumpers’ particular kind of theatricality spoke to a desire for transcending the limitations of earthly existence that pervaded turn-of-the-century Russian and early Soviet culture. Moreover, masquerading was an essential aspect of criminality in post-revolutionary Russia for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. This talk will propose that in their theatricality, these thieves served as reflections of new Soviet people—forced to don costumes in order to survive, as Andrei Sinyavsky and Sheila Fitzpatrick have argued—rather than as figures of deviance from the Soviet order.