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Whose Presence, Whose Absences? Decolonising Russian National Culture and History: Observations Through the Prism of Religious Contact

Introduction

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ABSTRACT In the introduction to this special issue, the editors are concerned with how the Russian state defines its national culture and history mainly with reference to Slavic civilisation, Orthodox Christianity and imperial glory. This post-Soviet discourse of nation-building may be understood as an attempt to cope with a sense of loss in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. That discourse also affects how nationalist-minded observers interpret space as naturally Russian and as part of the empire of the past (or the present). Regrettably, little consideration is being paid to Russia's ethnic and religious minority cultures, which hardly seem to contribute to Russian history and culture and sometimes do not even feature in representations thereof. Critically engaging with the ideas of presence and absence—the presence of one culture or tradition to the detriment of others—, the editors suggest, can potentially help to decolonise accounts and illustrations of Russian culture and heritage. In the best case, the outcome of such an exercise would be a more adequate involvement of minority representatives in the process of negotiating Russian national culture.

KEYWORDS nation-building, defining space, minority cultures, decolonisation, presence, absence

Introduction

When Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation" on February 24, 2022, followed by a *de facto* invasion of Ukrainian territory by the Russian Armed Forces, these drastic measures were taken with the aim of both demilitarisation and "denazification" [1]

of the neighbouring state. Given the frequency of statements by Russian politicians and television presenters that would qualify as ultra-nationalist almost anywhere, the accusation of Nazism may be surprising to an outside observer. Rather than their being truly concerned about possibly subscribing to fascist ideas, the real problem seems to be that a people that once belonged to Russia's immediate sphere of influence may oppose Russia's outlook and self-perception as imperial superpower and benefactor. Behind the invasion of Ukraine, we see a colonial mindset at work that is difficult to reconcile with global humanist principles or the more recent accomplishments in terms of more openness and respect for other cultures. Instead, in the essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin argues for the shared heritage of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, denying Ukrainians any degree of nationhood.

[2] While the measure of military intervention may be extreme, the Russian state's negation of another people's history and culture unfortunately does not constitute a complete exception. Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Russian political elites have been concerned with reconceptualising Russian identity, cautiously distancing themselves from formerly dominant ideologies such as socialism or state atheism. This process, however, has internally not automatically translated into better representation of Russia's ethnic and religious minorities, who hardly feature at all in official accounts of the country's history and culture. Critically reflecting upon the undertaking of forging a new national identity for the Russian Federation, this special issue of *Entangled Religions* pays specific attention to the absences produced by this particular self-image. The issue, thus, examines a situation of contact where the dominant party denies any contact by negating the presence of the other. Although not without ambivalences of its own, the project of post-Soviet nation-building in Russia is determined by the rhetoric of empire in combination with an embrace of Slavic civilisation and the Orthodox Christian denomination.[1] While such a national identity may include many Russian citizens and appeal strongly to some, it leaves out those who identify differently in ethnic and religious terms.

[3] In the former Soviet space beyond the borders of the Russian state, critical voices are now being heard that demand a decolonisation of Russia, in the sense of newly assessing the country's imperial history and ambitions as well as the colonial practices of the past and present, both in the near abroad and within Russia. The invasion of Ukraine has thus elevated a decolonial discourse that is also becoming more pronounced in states such as Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.[2] New links are being forged among nations in the former Soviet periphery.[3] Decolonial thinkers insist that Russia's imperial innocence must end for the state to come to terms with its colonial heritage, taking responsibility for the crimes of the past. In resonance with such a demand, the Ukrainian historian Andrii Portnov argues that it will be necessary for Russia to nurture a culture of guilt.[4] Some observers go as far as to question whether in the current climate one may still reasonably speak about a "post-Soviet" space or if the resistance of former colonial subjects to Russia's dreams of hegemonic power and imperial glory signals

1 This goes hand in hand with an adoption of so-called traditional values and a rejection of Western liberal culture.

2 Kassymbekova, Botakoz and Erica Marat. 2022. "Time to Question Russia's Imperial Innocence". Ponars Eurasia. April 27, 2022. https://www.ponarseurasia.org/time-to-question-russias-imperial-innocence/.

3 Kassymbekova, Botakoz and Marlene Laruelle. 2022. "The end of Russia's imperial innocence". Russia.Post. May 25, 2022. https://russiapost.info/politics/the_end_of_russias_imperial_innocence.

4 Portnov, Andrii. 2022. "Russland braucht eine Schuldkultur". Neue Zürcher Zeitung, July 20, 2022. https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/russland-braucht-eine-schuldkultur-ld.1693068.

the beginning of a new era, no longer primarily defined by the Soviet past. Apparently, the decolonial critique is in the process of establishing itself in the region as a potent discourse.

[4] With this special issue, we aim for a critical perspective on religion as one aspect of culture and self-perception that has particularly suffered from intervention by the Soviet state; an intervention that in some instances can be regarded as colonial in nature. In their efforts to establish state atheism, the Bolsheviks endeavoured to eliminate religion in all of its forms and to exchange it with a social order informed by reason, visions of modernity, the discoveries of science as well as technological progress. As the outcome of anti-religious campaigns, houses of worship were closed, repurposed or destroyed, while no small number of priests, imams and other religious leaders suffered the fate of deportation, imprisonment and sometimes execution. For ethnic minority groups, the Soviet nationalities policies meant that religion was being reduced to one component of native culture that would, the ideologists assumed, fade into oblivion in the course of time. This kind of religious repression no longer exists, and anyone is free to engage with their cultural and religious traditions as much as they wish. But among the religions to be encountered in Russia, Orthodox Christianity has assumed a primary role for a new Russian identity in the making, resulting in a situation where the heightened visibility of one religious group hides the presence of others. Taking the interplay of multiple denominations into account over the following pages, we intend to reflect upon the question of "whose presence, whose absences" mainly through the prism of religious contact.

[5] At the *Käte Hamburger Kolleg* (KHK) "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" (2008–2022), in the framework of which *Entangled Religions* developed as a journal, affiliated scholars analysed how religions interrelate with their prevailing environments. The basic assumption behind that research is that religious traditions emerge, consolidate, spread, condense and decline via situations of contact with other religious traditions. The challenge of the other tradition triggers a process of self-reference, leading to an intensification of expression that may both have internal and external effects. Complex processes of adaptation and demarcation, self-perception and perception by others define situations of religious contact and in the course of time contribute to the establishment of particular religious fields. Accordingly, as Volkhard Krech, as the *spiritus rector* of the KHK, put it, a religious field is "formed and reproduced by actors who develop an awareness of what might be regarded as religion." With awareness being a matter of communication and contact, "one of the basic constituents of the religious field is the intra- and inter-religious controversy surrounding its content and boundaries." Based on contact as its constituent, "[t]he religious field as a whole is not an essential unit […], but instead produces its cohesion and limits through negotiation processes and dynamics of attraction" (Krech 2012, 193–94, 198).

Presence and Absence

[6] When considering the issue of religious contact in the Russian geographical space, one must take into account the specific conditions brought about by a history of empire and colonisation. In contrast with nations in Western Europe, for instance, Russia differs in sheer size and the highly diversified composition of its population; both of these circumstances are an outcome of a gradual expansion of the state that began in the sixteenth century and the subsequent colonisation of the newly incorporated lands (Kivelson and Suny 2017, 75–88).[5]

5 Regarding size, vast distances from the political and religious centres of the hegemonic religious tradition in situations of religious contact may provide some typological particularities.

Beyond the more immediately obvious reasons for colonial expansion, the process came to be associated with the bestowal of the "gift of empire" upon subjects who had principally not asked for it (Grant 2009). Still adhering to their supposedly outdated beliefs and practices, these people were thought to be in need of the gift of civilisation. In different periods and places, setting them on the right path of development meant conversion to Orthodox Christianity. The rhetoric of the "civilising mission" can likewise be detected in various shades in the Soviet period (Igmen 2012; Stronski 2010) and has been preserved in some circles to the present moment (Curanović 2020, 1).[6] Thinkers in the nineteenth century explained the elevated status of Russia with its inheritance of the holy mission to restore the Byzantine Empire, whose successor Russia had become with Moscow as a "third Rome" (Curanović 2020, 3–4; Kopanski 1998, 204–7). For the Slavophile fraction, the superior rank of the Russian nation was specifically the consequence of its Slavic heritage.

[7] But let us take a closer look at the religious dimension of empire. As simply occupying territory and declaring it one's own does not have a lasting effect, the land together with the people living on it had to be changed in their essence. Christianisation was one of the means to truly claim the empire's new acquisitions. Constructing churches, building chapels and erecting crosses meant fastening the borderland space to the core regions and making it part of the Russian Empire (Curanović 2020, 3–4). Thus, the native inhabitants became exposed to the teachings of the church, but churches and other sites would also designate the space as Russian and indicate the borders of the empire. Correspondingly, one may also discern that the Russification of space helps to implement an Orthodox Christian conceptual order. These kind of demarcation practices may again be noticed in the present, when, for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church plans to build, in the North Caucasus, a number of churches dedicated to the memory of Alexander Nevsky, who is celebrated for protecting the Russian homeland from foreign invasion (Curanović 2020, 6). Surely, it is no coincidence that anger can be directed at these physical manifestations of Russian presence, as the targeting of churches by Muslim extremists in Dagestan and Chechnya in 2018 demonstrates.[7] In such flaring of rebellion, we may recognise the resistance of the local population against an intervention into their religious culture but sometimes also against their integration into the Russian nation-state. The political and the religious spheres are closely entangled, thus allowing for both political and religious interpretations of contact situations. Over centuries, missionary efforts were inhibited by indigenous resilience. In the Middle Volga region—to take one example—, conversion to Christianity among the native peoples occurred in three waves: the first after the conquest of Kazan in the mid-sixteenth century, the second under the reign of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century and the third from the late nineteenth century to the revolution of 1905 (Bryan 1995, 174–75). However, apostasy of the newly converted was common and sometimes also seized those communities whose members had been practising Orthodox Christians for generations. Especially in the nineteenth century, collective apostasies became rather frequent (Kefeli 2014, 26–27).

[8] When in contact with people belonging to some of the native populations of Russia, it is not uncommon to hear the statement that their culture and the local landscape form one unit and cannot simply be separated. Accordingly, landscape becomes a vital element of religious

6 See also the ultra-nationalist message propagated by the makers of the video clip "Я Русский Оккупант": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZH8do_jhE4.

7 Similarly, ethnic Ossetian nativists forcefully removed Orthodox Christian icons from a chapel and destroyed a memorial stone with the sign of the cross in 2013. For more information, see Shtyrkov (2019, 142).

space. This is an idea also taken up by the fiction writer Aleksei Ivanov, who in his books has been concerned with the question of colonisation and the recalcitrance of the land in the Urals and Siberia. In specific book sections, characters from his historical narratives wonder how it might be that churches were built and the indigenous people baptised and still it remains impossible to make the land one's own (Gorski 2018, 163, 173–74). Nor, Ivanov appears to suggest, can one ultimately grasp the natural (or spiritual?) laws that determine life in a specific environment and which have been intuitively absorbed by the original inhabitants of the land throughout the ages. As much as one tries to suppress the old beliefs and lifestyles, they are bound to resurface as "demons of the subconscious." The invisible, it turns out, might be a presence to haunt us.

[9] Another option for scholars with a particular interest in space and its perception would be an interpretation of the colonial encounter in terms of centre and periphery (Clowes 2011, 5–6). With regard to the historical expansion of the Russian state as well as the incorporation and control of formerly self-governed—but also ungoverned—non-Slavic territories, Moscow may be perceived as the colonising centre, whereas some of the inhabitants of the same territories hundreds of kilometres to the east or south of Moscow are nowadays very much aware of their political and economic dependence. In their minds, their native regions may have been reduced to the status of a colonised periphery. The centralising efforts of the state that commenced in the 2000s will have only contributed to such an estimation (Clowes 2016, 118–20). Even though the narrative of a providing centre and receiving periphery informs the thinking of citizens in Central Russia and other parts of the country, it hides the potential of the regions to contribute to a discussion about Russian culture and self-perception. After all, the supposed periphery is more than just an empty screen on which to project the centre's ideas of what constitutes national culture (Clowes 2011, 5–7). There would be much to learn from ethnic minority discourses in the Russian regions, but unfortunately it seems that the willingness to engage in discussion and encourage the participation of various actors is lacking. In the centre's marginalisation of voices from the periphery, one may indeed discern a colonial dynamic.

[10] The examination of the empirical material—much, but not all of it from Russia—that our participants contribute to this special issue allows for further interpretation of the process of religious contact. Having repeatedly visited the city of Tyumen in Siberia over a period of several years, one of the editors of this journal issue recently wondered about the depiction of the place in a guidebook presented to him. Judging from the picture of a cathedral reproduced on its cover and the advertising of dozens of Orthodox Christian churches in the pages of the book, one would be tempted to perceive Tyumen as an epitome of Russianness. When taking a more long-term historical perspective, however, we realise that the city is located on the territory of what used to be the Khanate of Siberia; it was built on the land of Chingi-Tura, one of the khanate's cities, and the name is supposed to have Turkic origins (Brumfield 2000, 310–11). One may also discover a certain contrast between the guidebook that briefly mentions only one mosque, without accompanying the text with a picture here, and the impression to be gained on the streets of the city, which clearly has its "Muslim" neighbourhoods and whose ethnic composition appears to be more "Eastern" than that of many other Russian cities in the European part of the country. This is just one of a great number of examples that might serve to make the point that the presence of one part of the population in accounts of Russian history and culture can simultaneously mean the absence of others.

[11] The special issue, thus, aims at examining presence and absence within the greater frame-

work of contact between religious traditions. Regarding the framework, we aim at scrutinising the type of religious contact that takes place when one party denies or ignores the presence of the other and forces it into a state of absence. We ask: What forms does Russian national culture assume in the present moment and what sources does it draw from? What do members of the ethnic and religious minorities make of such representations and how do they react to the denial of their presence? Who engages in the negotiation of belonging? How to decolonise Russian national and religious culture and how to claim a place for oneself? And where beyond the borders of the state is the narrative around Russian national culture being reproduced or challenged?

[12] This is where we return to the ongoing formation of a Russian national identity, built upon convictions of Slavic superiority and Orthodox Christian divine ordinance. In that homogeneous picture of Russian national history and culture, the presence of ethnic and religious "others" is typically concealed. Scholars of culture and heritage have pointed out that heritage is of no stable substance and we ought to regard it as a construct that continues to be negotiated by various groups and individuals (van de Port and Meyer 2018). A religion's particular tradition is, after all, a matter of responses and challenges occurring in situations of contact. In the process where groups in ongoing contact produce tradition, some aspects of culture will be highlighted and others placed in the background or completely left out. One or another minority group may discover that they have been excluded from the compound of elements forming a nation's heritage. In those instances where in Western Europe ethnic or racial considerations have in the past impacted the representation of culture, we may speak of the "whitening" of a state's heritage or national identity (de Witte 2019, 611). But in practice, it often becomes difficult to differentiate between exclusion for reasons of ethnic, racial or religious otherness. The Soviet Union liked to present itself as fair and considerate towards its multi-cultural population, although in effect it particularly promoted forms of culture that had their origins in Europe. Apart from that, ethnic culture was generally secondary to political ideology, while religion for the most part was either regarded a problem to be solved or not spoken of. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the question of ethnic and religious belonging returned to the political agenda of the Russian Federation. Specifying the nation's heritage and culture may also be a measure to react to the influx of working migrants from Central Asia or Azerbaijan that some perceive as foreign elements posing a threat to the subsistence of an uncorrupted culture (Tolz and Harding 2015).[8] In this striving for a new national identity, minorities—both foreign and domestic—may be perceived as disrupting an ideal image and thus obstructing the "closure" of the nation (Tyrer and Sayyid 2012, 353–54). In the rural winter scenery of *maslenitsa* merriment, with the domes of the Orthodox church gleaming in the sun about to disappear beyond the forest of birch trees, little space is left for ethnic or religious diversity. When conceptualising Russia in this way, "others" better not constitute part of the village environment, whereas in the urban environment they are advised to blend inconspicuously into the background. If they refuse to do so, it creates confusion. Not really there but potentially harmful, these "others" are both absences and troubling presences, simultaneously unreal and hyperreal (2012, 355). In this respect, they resemble the "demons of the subconscious" from the previous page.

[13] As stated above, delineating and specifying a nation's heritage can only be a project in progress, although we see that the construction of a stable and ideal tradition may also be a

8 But it may also be regarded a reaction to a more general process of globalisation and the changes that go along with it.

response to challenging situations of contact. The emergence and stabilisation of a dogma in the field of religion corresponds to the emergence of ideal traditions and historical master narratives in the field of politics. The discourse about the nation involves numerous participants and its main themes may alter with time. Russia's ethnic and religious minorities, further, do not have to be passive recipients, but they can actively get involved in the negotiation of belonging. In their accounts of history and culture—in textbooks, museum exhibitions or art projects—, they may re-inscribe their own presence. Becoming aware of one's own culture and its contribution to history can have an empowering effect, making these minorities visible. Their accounts may also substantially differ from the dominant narrative and call it into question. And sometimes, they do not have to articulate anything, but only by engaging in certain customs and practices are they able to manifest a lived culture. Those customs might indicate beliefs and conceptions entirely at odds with the more widely shared sense of being in this world. In this case, efforts at decolonisation are no longer only concerned with rewriting history or broadening the category of heritage. Instead, one may understand these efforts as involved in the process of world-making, where one reality may be replaced with another (Blaser and Cadena 2018). Here, self-confident individuals do not contend for inclusion in the picture of Russian national culture. In fact, they ignore it and set out to produce their own images of national culture or lived tradition, informed by their religious self-understanding. With regard to the theme of the special issue, this means that the relationship between presence and absence is reversed.

The Contributions to this Special Issue

Over the following pages, five authors share their evaluations of the diversity and multiplicity of Russian history and culture as well as the sometimes difficult relations with the immediate neighbours. In his paper about the Holy Rus', Oleksandr Zabirko (2022) provides the reader with an insight into an aspect of Russian national identity that assumed a particular form during the nineteenth century and continues to affect the perception of the country as an empire. With the concept of Holy Rus', Orthodox Christianity becomes one of the columns of national identification. But Zabirko points out how Holy Rus' also constitutes a spatial concept that was employed in the colonial expansion of the Russian state and in situations of encounter with ethnic and religious others. From a Russian nationalist perspective, then, the current military conflict in Eastern Europe may also be read as an effort to re-establish the sacred geography of Russia, ruptured by the independence of Ukraine. [14]

The text by Ivan Sablin (2022) can likewise be read as a contribution to the discussion about nation-building, but it focuses specifically on the late Soviet period. His research subject are parliamentary debates in the times of perestroika, where the involvement of representatives of different religious communities created situations of transcultural contact. The process of desecularisation that set in at this point in time was, at least in part, going to define the constitution of the emerging post-Soviet republics. For the omnipresence of Orthodox Christianity in these debates the author makes responsible previous power asymmetries. Already at a point so many years back, towards the end of the Soviet period, the picture of Russia taking shape in the context of discussion suggests a nationalist imagination. [15]

With the paper by Jesko Schmoller (2022), who also serves as one of the guest editors of the special issue, we are entering the contemporary moment. Schmoller looks into the situation of people from the Muslim minority in the Russian Urals before the background of [16]

Orthodox Christianity's presence and Islam's absence in representations of Russian history and culture. By going on pilgrimages in their native territory, these Muslim believers are able to reconnect with the surrounding land and claim a tradition that is neither indebted to Orthodox Christianity nor to an elevated Slavic civilisation. Their interaction with the landscape allows for a reinterpretation of what is being presented as Russian culture and—on a spatial level—it produces a place in an environment that otherwise tends to be interpreted in only Russian terms.

[17] Similar to the previous author, Victoria Kravtsova (2022) is concerned with the difficult circumstances of ethnic and religious minorities in present-day Russia, whose difference from mainstream Russian society is being erased. She analyses the book "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by the writer Guzel Yakhina that was published in 2015 to wide acclaim. Yakhina tells the story of Zuleikha, a Tatar woman that is deported to Siberia in the context of Soviet collectivisation in the 1930s. By cutting ties with her ethnic and religious culture, Zuleikha is portrayed as becoming an emancipated woman of the young Soviet state. Metaphorically speaking, she is opening her eyes to the new Soviet reality. Kravtsova criticises how in the relative absence of post- and decolonial perspectives many readers did not even realise that negating the subjectivity of a non-Russian woman could be offensive to ethnic minority readers. She argues that the book does not question but confirms the (neo-)imperialist and (neo-)colonialist attitudes in contemporary Russian society.

[18] Eventually, Mirja Lecke (2023) takes us beyond the borders of the Russian state to neighbouring Georgia, where she investigates the relationship between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. This case of religious contact is a curious one, as some observers regard the churches as separate and equal, whereas others see nothing but a unity under Russian guidance. Like Kravtsova, the author draws upon artistic works for her analysis: a travel feature on Georgia by the Russian graphic artist Viktoria Lomasko and a documentary novel by the Georgian writer Lasha Bugadze. Lomasko sceptically questions the hegemonic discourse around the idea of "unity in faith." Bugadze, on the other hand, rather perceives an unwholesome entanglement of the Georgian Orthodox Church with the state and in extension with Russia.

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The Concept of Holy Rus' in Russian Literary and Cultural Tradition: Between the Third Rome and the City of Kitezh

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ABSTRACT The paper explores the genealogy of the concept of Holy Rus' (or Holy Russia) in Russian literature and culture from the nineteenth century onward. An integral part of Russian sacred geography, Holy Rus' underwent some profound semantic transformations in order to become an epitome of religious and ethnic purity in the context of Russia's imperial expansion. Focusing on the literary manifestations of Russia's contacts with the ethnic and religious Other as well as on its struggle with the universalist claims of the European Enlightenment, the study highlights the colonial aspects of the notion of Holy Rus', thus questioning its potential of providing a viable 'indigenous' alternative to the Western epistemological hegemony. Finally, the paper offers a critical review of the present-day exploitation of Holy Rus' as a transcendental model of both a unifying national force and inter-confessional dialogue.

KEYWORDS Holy Rus', sacred geography, martyrdom, 'decolonial option', Russian colonialism

Introduction

A strange and elusive epithet for modern Russia, the formula of Holy Rus' (святая Русь, sometimes translated as "Holy Russia") is firmly anchored in the country's political and cultural discourses, where the scope of its functions ranges from a rallying motto and a means of self-identification to a religious and philosophical concept, and finally to a literary commonplace. Connected with both the exclusivist idea of Moscow as the Third Rome (i.e., the imperial successor to fallen Byzantium) and the universal Christian idea of an Empire of Faith, the concept of Holy Rus' has been profoundly transformed by Russian literary classics of the nineteenth century to become an important element of Russian nation-building and imperial expansion. [1]

This article examines Holy Rus' as a spatial concept, where *space* is understood as both a geographical and metaphysical entity, 'the space of the sacred'. The sacred refers here not [2]

only to the Christian idea of salvation, but also to symbolic forms and communal practices supportive of collective identity. In this context, the two semantic poles of Holy Rus', the notions of holiness and Russianness, may at first glance point at the mere coupling of ethnic and religious self-perception through the identification of Russia with Christian Orthodoxy—a phenomenon which historically led both to an appropriation of Orthodoxy by Russia and to an assimilation of Russians into it, so that 'being Russian' was and often is equated to 'being an Orthodox Christian'. However, Orthodox culture was never strictly ethnic or national, but rather the culture of an imperial civilization; this fact made the system of both ethnic and territorial differentiation in the Russian Empire particularly diffuse and imprecise (Byford, Doak, and Hutchings 2020, 13–15). The spatial delimitation of Holy Rus' as well as the relation between holiness and Russianness within its boundaries are therefore not obvious or given, but only become visible through contact, or rather multifold clashes, either with ethnic and religious Others or with the language of secularism and Enlightenment. It is precisely the situations of contact and conflict in which Holy Rus' loses its enigmatic flair and reveals a broad range of political and poetic functions. Finally, the contact allows for designating the periphery and the center of the 'holy Russian' space. The latter frequently acquires the attribute of *purity* in both ethnic and religious terms (e.g., the purity of faith), as it designates a symbolic area untouched by or resistant to foreign influences. Within the context of Russian imperial expansion, the idea of Holy Rus' became an important tool for conceptualizing Russia's territorial growth as well as for dealing with changes in the country's ethnic and religious composition. However, this imperial link is by no means obvious. On the contrary, Holy Rus' is often camouflaged as a popular idea, detached from any kind of state politics, let alone imperialism. Furthermore, most poetic manifestations of Holy Rus' celebrate a millennial religious tradition supposedly preserved by the Russian people in the face of the universalist claims of the European Enlightenment and which, therefore, at least potentially provide a sort of 'decolonial option' that emerges from the very depth of Russian culture. Indeed, if we understand decoloniality as untangling the Eurocentric production of knowledge (Mignolo 2007; Tlostanova 2012), then the idea of Holy Rus' may easily be interpreted as an example of an indigenous, subaltern episteme, which over the centuries has successfully resisted Western hegemony.[1] In order to look at these claims with critical eyes, this paper invites the readers to revisit some central texts about Holy Rus' with a renewed sensitivity to colonial sentiments. It also aims at scrutinizing the spatiality of Holy Rus' by asking where this imagined entity is located and who its inhabitants are. While the genre specifics of different texts about Holy Rus' may vary considerably, ranging from poems to political manifestos, the notion of space as *tertium comparationis* unites most of these texts and thus makes it possible to trace semantics and pragmatics of Holy Rus' as a concept.[2]

1 For example, in his otherwise well-researched and nuanced monograph *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia*, John P. Burgess asserts that "Holy Rus' seems to promise Russians a world different from, and a world better than, the technical efficiency and competitive rat race of what we have come to call 'postmodernity', which now governs their everyday lives as much as anywhere in the West" (Burgess 2017, 2).

2 This study focuses predominantly on modern, secular literature featuring Holy Rus'. This focus, however, brings some serious limitations with regard to the scope of the analyzed material, as it leaves both folkloristic and liturgical but also many relevant theological texts outside of this study. While acknowledging these shortcomings, one may still argue that such a narrow focus also has its advantages, as it restricts the discussion to topics related to spatiality of Holy Rus' and its (geo)political connotations.

What's in a Name?

While the etymology of the word *Rus'* remains an object of scholarly debates, both in academic literature and in Russian *belles lettres,* this term has long been accepted as a common denomination for East Slavic tribes and their early medieval polity. Although semantically connected to *Rus'* as a collective name, the term *Holy Rus'* has its own genealogy. In literature, it first appears in the missives of Russia's first political refugee, Prince Andrei Kurbskii, to Tsar Ivan IV in the 1570s, where it acquires clear oppositional features: Kurbskii counterposes the tsar to Holy Rus' because his violent deeds and cruelty bring shame on "the holy Russian land" (Cherniavsky 1961, 159–228). Another early literary example is the „Tale of the Siege of Azov" (by the Turks in 1641), in which the besieged cossacks refer to Holy Rus' as a space defined by the miracle-working icons, the orthodox faith, but also by the (Christian) Tsar and the (Christian) Muscovite state (Cherniavsky 1961, 101–28). In the folkloristic tales, the concept of Holy Rus' has no clear geographical or ethnic boundaries but rather illustrates a pre-modern, 'ecclesiastic' identity of belonging to the community of true Christian believers. Despite the occasional references to Moscow, the real center of this metaphysical space remains Palestine and the city of Jerusalem (Dmitriev 2012, 326–29). Thus, Holy Rus' is a territorial concept insofar as it embraces the land of salvation, with its icons, saints, martyrs and all the Christian people (Cherniavsky 1958, 625; Averincev 1988, 216–17). [3]

Following Michael Cherniavsky's reading of the „Tale of the Siege of Azov," Eric Hobsbawm concludes that being a method „for envisaging what cannot be envisaged," the notion of the Holy Rus' is „unquestionably a popular, an unofficial force, not one created from above" (Hobsbawm 1990, 50). [4]

Another premodern, folkloristic formula, which in the nineteenth century together with Holy Rus' paved its way into the Russian master narrative, was the metaphor of *the Russian God* [русский Бог]. The patriotic legend connected the notion of the Russian God to the victory of the Muscovite troops led by Dmitrii Donskoi over the Mongol army under Emir Mamai at Kulikovo Field in 1380. According to legend, in the face of his imminent defeat the 'heathen' Mamai shouted: "Great is the Russian God!" (Reiser 1961). [5]

Coupled with the notion of Holy Rus', the Russian God entered the newly established Russian nationalist discourse through sentimentalist and romantic literature, where both these tropes acquired a status of historical legacy and functioned as expressions of authentic Russian tradition, which defied the westernized language and culture of the nobility. [6]

Unsurprisingly, the spread of these patriotic *topoi* gained momentum after the French Revolution and particularly during the Napoleonic wars. For instance, in 1807 Vladislav Ozerov spoke of the Russian God in his tragedy *Dmitrii Donskoi*, in which the battle at Kulikovo Field and the corresponding patriotic legend at first glance merely provide a historical background for a sentimental love story. However, *Dmitrii Donskoi* was staged soon after the Battle of Eylau (1807), when its patriotic ethos was particularly apposite[3] and the might of the Russian God seemed to be directed not only against the 'false' religion of the medieval Tatars and Mongols, but, by extension, against the secularism and civic nationalism of the French. [7]

In 1812, as Napoleon's *Grande Armée* was marching towards Moscow, the Russian God and Holy Rus' became ubiquitous on the pages of countless patriotic leaflets, posters and proclamations. The long echo of this discourse can be heard in the works that are today part [8]

3 It was later used as the basis for an opera of the same name by Anton Rubinstein.

of the Russian literary canon, for example in Pushkin's verse novel *Eugene Onegin*, where in the tenth chapter one comes across the following lines (Pushkin 1975, 315):[4]

> The storm of the year 1812 [9]
> began – who helped us then?
> People's wrath,
> Barclay[5], the winter, or the Russian God?

Albeit ironic in tone, the same chapter of Pushkins's masterpiece also grasps the patriotic [10] essence of Holy Rus' as a concept, when the narrator describes the protagonist's sudden transformation from a Byronic hero to a self-declared Russian patriot (Pushkin 1975, 261)[6]:

> Grown sick of either passing for a Melmoth [11]
> or sporting any other mask,
> he once awoke a patriot
> during a rainy tedious spell.
> For Russia, gentlemen, he instantly
> felt a tremendous liking,
> and it is settled. He is now in love,
> he raves of nothing now, but Rus',
> he now hates Europe
> with its dry politics,
> with its lewd bustle.
> Onegin is to go: he will
> see holy Rus': her fields,
> wilds, towns, and seas.

Thus, to see Holy Rus' one needs to turn away both from Europe and from rational, "dry" [12] politics alike. Though an uneasy task for a westernized Russian noble, it still seems worth trying: While Russia as a country may occasionally (and in Onegin's case rather unexpectedly) provoke some "tremendous liking", it is ultimately Holy Rus' that a true Russian patriot should fall in love with. To be sure, in Pushkin's verse novel this patriotic dimension of Holy Rus' is placed in a satirical context, where it points at the protagonist's fickleness and cynicism rather than at any kind of stable political convictions. Nevertheless, other texts, full of unironic meditations on the political essence of Holy Rus', were not long in coming.

From Poetics to Politics

While the semantics of Holy Rus' remained rather opaque, the concept as such was firmly [13]

4 In the Russian original: „Гроза двенадцатого года / Настала – кто тут нам помог? / Остервенение народа, / Барклай, зима иль русский бог?" (Pushkin 1963, 203). All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise.

5 Prince Michael Andreas Barclay de Tolly (1761–1818) was a Russian noble of German-Baltic origin. He was a field marshal and minister of war of the Russian Empire during Napoleon's invasion in 1812.

6 In the Russian original: „Наскуча или слыть Мельмотом, / Иль маской щеголять иной, / Проснулся раз он патриотом / Дождливой скучною порой. / Россия, господа, мгновенно / Ему понравилась отменно / И решено: уж он влюблен, / Уж Русью только бредит он, / Уж он Европу ненавидит / С ее политикой сухой, / С ее развратной суетой. / Онегин едет; он увидит / Святую Русь: ее поля, / Пустыни, грады и моря" (Pushkin 1963).

anchored in the context of the "Official Nationality" (Официальная Народность)—the dominant ideological doctrine of Russian emperor Nicholas I. Originally proposed by Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov in 1833, the "triad" of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality was soon vocally supported by conservative Russian intellectuals and was eagerly adopted as a state-wide political ideology (Riasanovsky 2005, 133–35; Hosking 1998, 146). Coined as a Russian counterpart to *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, Uvarov's triad entailed the reunion of throne and altar within the Russian political imagery. However, unlike the faith and the monarchy, the term 'nationality' required further clarification, if not deliberate poetic 'engineering'—this is precisely the point where the tropes of Holy Rus' and the Russian God came into play.

[14] To be sure, the nationalization of the folkloristic tradition alongside with its use for the legitimization of the tsarist autocracy provoked rather mixed reactions in the circles of the Russian intellectual elite. The poetic texts of Petr Viazemskii (1792–1878), one of the most prominent representatives of the Russian 'literary aristocracy' of the nineteenth century, provide a good illustration for such 'wavering'. In 1828, three years after the coronation of Tsar Nicholas I, Viazemskii published the poem "The Russian God" ("Русский Бог"), which offers a snappy satire of the attempts to use this trope for the purposes of Russian nation-building. According to Viazemskii, the Russian God is a god of frostbites and famine, of wretched roads and bitter poverty, of run-down estates, finally—a god of foreign adventurers and here, above all, "God of Germans, now and ever" (Бог в особенности немцев)[7]. Yet twenty years later, in the tumultuous year of 1848, the very same enlightened Russian intellectual Petr Viazemskii looked with utter horror and unconcealed disdain at the European continent overwhelmed by revolts and armed uprisings. In the poem "Holy Rus'" (1848), Viazemskii juxtaposes Russia with the rebellious Europe and lists the symbols that protect his homeland from malicious European influences. These symbols are the orthodox faith, the loyalty to the Tsar, and finally the Russian language, which together unite the commoners and the nobility and, more importantly, comprise the sacred image of Holy Rus', which defends Russia from Europe's pseudo-wisdom (лжемудрость) and the false idea of freedom.

[15] Being primarily a work of literature, Viazemskii's text was at the same time a poetic reaction to the official manifesto of Nicholas I "About the Events in Western Europe" (О событиях в западной Европе), in which the Tsar made the following statement:[8]

> [16] Following the example of our Orthodox forefathers, having called upon the help of Almighty God, We are ready to meet our enemies, wherever they may appear. Without sparing ourselves, let us, in an unending union with our Holy Rus', defend the honor of the Russian name and keep our borders untouched.

[17] Thus, the initiative for dealing with Holy Rus' comes not from the poet but from the state authorities, which make use of their prerogative of defining the foundations of this patriotic concept. These foundations can be summarized as follows: 1) the Orthodox faith as the ancestral religion, 2) the fact that the enemies of Russia may appear anywhere in the world, and finally 3) the idea that the protection of Russian borders should be guaranteed anywhere, not just within or along those borders. Much more important, however, is the semantic delimitation between Holy Rus' and Russia: Both in the poem and in the manifesto, these two

7 A reference to Baltic Germans, who were, in Viazemskii's opinion, far too numerous as hangers-on at court.

8 In the Russian original: "По заветному примеру Православных Наших предков, призвав в помощь Бога Всемогущаго, Мы готовы встретить врагов Наших, где бы они ни предстали, и, не щадя Себя, будем, в неразрывном союзе с Святою Нашею Русью, защищать честь имени Русскаго и неприкосновенность пределов Наших" (cit. Kiseleva 2007, 136).

concepts appear as not identical, but rather autonomous, allied entities, connected by some unspecified, mysterious bond.

[18] An important addition which Viazemskii brings into the concept of Holy Rus' is a poetic valorization of the Russian language: It is exactly the common language, which makes it possible to view all speakers of Russian as "brothers of one family" (братья семьи одной), while on the other hand the same language is proclaimed a medium through which Russians communicate with God. Moreover, Holy Rus' is understood as an idea that emerges from the language itself (Святая Русь! родного слова / Многозначительная речь! – "Holy Rus'! the native word's / most meaningful speech!").

[19] The novelty of Viazemskii's logocentric approach lies in the transformation of the traditional Russian diglossia, where the liturgical language was not the spoken Russian but Church Slavonic—an archaic language, which in terms of lexicology and syntax deviates considerably from Russian. Together with Pushkin and other prominent Russian writers, Petr Viazemskii actively promoted the establishment of a modern, secular language variety for the purposes of literature. This new variety was a compromise between the spoken language of the Russian nobility (which included, among other features, frequent French, English or German borrowings) and the Church Slavonic written tradition. The common term for the modern, standard Russian, 'literaturnyi iazyk' (literary language), reflects the 'belletristic' and secular origins of this language variety, yet in the poem "Holy Rus"' Viazemskii in a somewhat paradoxical manner declares the sacred status of this 'secularized' idiom (Мне свят язык наш величавый—"Our majestic language is holy to me"), thus emphasizing the relevance of religious imagery for Russian nation-building, in which the orthodox faith was supposed to become a national religion and the tsarist autocracy—a national form of government.

[20] In the first half of the nineteenth century, the terms Russian God and Holy Rus', though frequent in use, did not constitute a single, rationalized and theoretically grounded doctrine, but function rather as elusive metaphors and symbols which contribute to an equally ephemeral Russian national credo. The clear demarcation between the rational and the symbolic was typical for early romanticism, where symbols usually point to the limitations of a rational apprehension of reality—this is especially true for the French conservative ("legitimist") intellectuals, and in particular for the writings of Joseph de Maistre, who spent more than 14 years in Russia, thus becoming an established name in the Russian intellectual scene: In the philosophical constructions of de Maistre, the symbolic spaces come into play in those situations where rational thinking reaches its limits or ultimately fails. From this perspective, both Holy Rus' and the Russian God may be viewed as ideas with clearly symbolic meaning.[9]

[21] One of the most profound attempts to provide a rational definition for the idea of Holy Rus' was made by Vasilii Zhukovskii (1783–1852). In his letter to Viazemskii, which was published in 1848 as a separate booklet, Zhukovskii argues for a conceptual separation between Holy Rus' and the Russian state. According to Zhukovskii, the latter remains the sole and exclusive property of the Tsar, while Holy Rus', as a "common treasure" (совокупное сокровище) belongs both to the tsar and the people, and therefore functions as a link between the political elite and the "common folk". Furthermore, "Russia belongs to the ensemble of European

9 The programmatically irrational way of dealing with Russian self-perception culminates in the famous lines by Fedor Tiutchev that "Russia cannot be understood by the intellect, / nor can it be measured by the common measure; / it has its own particular form, / you can only have faith in Russia." (Умом Россию не понять, / Аршином общим не измерить /У ней особенная стать / В Россию можно только верить). Aleksandr Ospovat's illuminating study on the content and context of Tiutchev's verse demonstrates how the tropes of Holy Rus' and the Russian God in Tiutchev's oeuvre contributed to the consolidation of the particularly mystical view on Russia (see Ospovat 2020, 298–303).

states; Holy Rus', on the other hand, remains a single legacy of the Russian people, which was entrusted to them by God" (Zhukovskii 1885, 245). The symbolic distance to the existing states of the continent (including the "westernized" Russian Empire itself) made it possible to perceive Holy Rus' as a model that could be filled with very different positive meanings and connotations.

[22] Although Zhukovskii's vision of Holy Rus' is based largely on his understanding of Russian history, he also applies the historical background for envisaging a new, utopian national community:[10]

> [23] In the expression "Holy Rus' " you can hear the entirety of our unique history […] It received its profound meaning from the times when we were divided […] when there were many small princedoms dependent on the Grand Princedom. When we all united, it was not to become Russia, but Rus', that is, not a government, but a family. We all had a single fatherland, a single faith, a single tongue, the same memories and traditions. This is why, even in the bloodiest feuds, when Russia still did not exist, when the princes constantly fought each other for power, there was still a single, living, undivided Holy Rus' for all.

[24] Being explicitly dissociated from modern state forms, Zhukovskii's vision of Holy Rus' can be defined as a peculiar form of nationalism without the nation state, in which a romantic ideal of a homogenous community (with the same faith, language, and traditions) is based not only on ethnic and cultural, but also on mystical and religious grounds. This is the reason why in his definition of Holy Rus', Zhukovskii also seizes the opportunity to rehabilitate the Russian God by declaring him the symbol of "our special covenant" (особенный союз наш) with the Lord. Since Zhukovskii's missive was addressed to Viazemskii, who twenty years earlier had made the very idea of the Russian God an object of satire, the whole text of Zhukovskii received both a programmatic character and a somewhat scoffing undertone. Nevertheless, Zhukovskii unequivocally insists on Russia's special relationship with God by asserting that "an English, French or German God – all of this sounds ridiculous. But when you hear of the Russian God, your soul is struck with awe" (Zhukovskii 1885, 247).

[25] Yet the most visible political achievement of this national discourse was the option to exclude the critics of the ruling system and the enemies of the prevailing ideological doctrine from the Russian *corps politique*. This rhetorical strategy can be best illustrated by Nikolai Iazykov's poem with a title "K nenashim", which can literally be translated as "To [those who are] not ours", i.e. "to the aliens" or "to the foreigners" (1844). Although Iazykov never stated publicly or in print against whom his poem was directed, its torrent strong language obviously targets the most prominent Russian 'Westerners', like Petr Chaadaev and Aleksandr Gercen (Herzen) (Lilly 1972, 803):[11]

10 In the Russian original: "В выражении Святая Русь отзывается вся наша особенная история… свое глубокое значение оно приобрело со времен раздробления на уделы, когда над разными подчиненными князьями был один главный, великий, когда при великом княжестве было множество малых, от него зависимых, и когда это все соединялось в одно, не в Россию, а в Русь, то есть не в государство, а в семейство, где у всех были одна отчизна, одна вера, один язык, одинакия воспоминания и предания; вот отчего и в самых кровавых междоусобиях, когда еще не было России, когда удельные князья беспрестанно дрались между собою за ее области, для всех была одна, живая, нераздельная Святая Русь" (Zhukovskii 1885, 245).

11 In the Russian original: "Вы, люд заносчивый и дерзкий, / Вы, опрометчивый оплот / Ученья школы богомерзкой, / Вы все – не русский вы народ! […] Умолкнет ваша злость пустая, / Замрет неверный ваш язык: / Крепка, надежна Русь святая, / И русский Бог еще велик!" (cit. Iazykov 1988, 350–51).

You arrogant and outrageous people, [26]
who make up a reckless bulwark
of a blasphemous school,

You all do not belong to Russian people (lit. "you are non-Russian people")! [27]
[…]
Your pointless rage will calm down,
Your treacherous tongues will fall silent,
[Because] holy Rus' is still strong and firm,
And the Russian God is still great!

In Search of Pure Russianness

The sacred character of the Russian national body significantly influenced the conceptualization of the geographical space in which this body was located. Despite being topographically blurred, the metaphor of Holy Rus' still contributed to an overall distinction between the territory of the Russian Empire and the national Russian territory. Holy Rus' was viewed by the Russian Slavophiles as an integral part of the national territory and as such it was declared sacred. Thus according to Zhukovskii Holy Rus' incorporates "anything which one finds only in Russian land, anything which only a Russian can understand" („что нигде, кроме Русской земли, не встретится, чего никто, кроме русского человека, и понять не может", Zhukovskii (1885), 239]. However, the affiliation of specific territories to such an ideal Russian land as well as their "Russianness" were understood and expressed in literature in many different, often contradictory ways, hence "Russianness" as such remained a rather fuzzy, unspecified category. [28]

The sacralization of geographical space offered a tool for overcoming this obvious deficit. The poetic colonization of the Volga and its elevation to Russian "national river" may serve here as an example. Already in 1768 Vasilii Maikov compares the Volga with rivers of Eden; Nikolai Karamzin defines it as "the most sacred river of the world" (река священнейшая в мире) in "Volga" (1793); while Apollon Grigor'ev calls it "the Holy Mother" (святая мать) in "Up Along the Volga" ("Vverkh po Volge", 1862). Unsurprisingly, the motives of sanctity make a tandem with the motives of state authority. Thus, for both Karamzin and Grigor'ev the Volga acts as a "queen" (царица), while Nikolai Iazykov describes it as "stately river" (державная река) and "the ruler of the waves" (властительница вод). Iazykov's poem "To the Rhine" ("K Reinu", 1840), which stages a dialogue between the Volga and its German counterpart, is of particular importance here, since it illustrates the link to German Romantic nationalism and, above all, to the so-called Rhine romanticism (*Rheinromantik*) of the early nineteenth century. Both in German and Russian poetry the interpretation of the landscape conditions and the history of the respective river valleys serve as metonymies for imagining (or rather constructing) national communities. Although the sacral character of the Rhine is less evident in the corresponding German tradition, one may still come across some prominent examples of similar poetic sacralizations of space: for instance, in the famous "Wacht am Rhein" (1840), where the river is referred to as "the sacred landmark" or "the sacred frontier" (heilige Landesmark). It is probably not a coincidence that in the Russian as well as in the German case, the sacralization of space is rooted in the enmity against the French model of nation-building and territorial expansion, which was widely perceived as the expansion [29]

of secularism and liberalism. Thus, already in Konstantin Batiushkov's poem "Crossing the Rhine" ("Perekhod cherez Rein", 1814), the march of the Russian Imperial Army through Germany towards Paris is described as the liberation of the "holy Rhine" from the evil forces of "new Attila" (i.e., Napoleon).

Far less evident, however, is the backlash of this poetic discourse on the situation within the [30]
Russian Empire. In the poem "Russian Rivers in 1813" (*Rossiiskie reki v 1813 godu*), Aleksandr Vostokov offers a story of the personified "rivers of Holy Rus' " (реки святой Руси), who, led by Mother Volga, drive the French troops out of the country (Vostokov 1979, 117). Modelled as a folkloristic "tale" with a distinctly archaic rhythm and metre, the poem concludes with Volga's triumphant statement: "Glory to you, the rivers of Holy Rus'! / No enemy will ever come to drink from your waters: / From now on, give your water to the Slavs and cherish them" (Исполать вам, реки святой Руси! / Не придет уж лютый враг нашу воду пить: / Вы славян поите, лелеете!). Moreover, the Volga itself flows now „through Holy Rus' down to the blue [Caspian] Sea" (Через всю святую Русь до синя моря), thus metaphorically "russifying" the traditional settlement areas of the Tatars, the Kalmyks, the Chuvashs, and other non-Russian nations. Similarly, in his poetic appeal "To the Rhine" (1840), Nikolai Iazykov provides a lengthy catalogue of the Volga's tributaries, like the Cheremshan or the Syzran, yet he does not even try to reflect on the Tatar or Chuvash origins of their names, but instead uses them as an illustration for the sheer "vastitude of Russian waters" (обширность русских вод). While in the odes and poems of the late eighteenth century the authors (e.g., Derzhavin, Karamzin) at least found some room for articulating the ethnic otherness of the Upper and Lower Volga regions, by the time of the Napoleonic Wars, the Volga had lost its association with the cultural diversity, and—as the main river of Holy Rus'—was instead presented with a new uniformity as both Russian and Christian.

With regard to the ethnic Russian territories of the Upper Volga region (e.g., Tver, Rzhev, [31]
Torzhok etc.), the sacred space of Holy Rus' may even occasionally find its topographical incarnation, as is the case in Fedor Glinka's "Letters to a Friend" (1815), where the area near the town of Rzhev is described as a realm of high morality, good order and racial purity (since most of its dwellers are white-skinned and blue-eyed), therefore this particular region seems capable of reaching the high ideal of Holy Rus' (Glinka 1990, 57):[12]

> Having crossed the Volga, one may find himself right in Holy Rus'! The spoken lan- [32]
> guage here is purely Russian, the clothes are Russian too – feriaz' and kokoshniks
> with pearls are beautiful as fair plaits are! The cleanness inside the houses is as-
> tonishing!

The Russian word for "peasant"—*krestianian*—being etymologically connected to *khristianin* [33]
(a Christian) undoubtedly facilitated the understanding of Holy Rus' as a rural area, inhabited by traditional peasant communities. In the nineteenth century, this interpretation was eagerly grasped and developed by the Slavophile thinkers (e.g., Aleksei Khomiakov, Konstantin Aksakov), who glorified Russian peasant life and described Holy Rus' as a society spiritually united by the Orthodox Church, with the traditional peasant community being its pillar (Fig. 1).

The Slavophiles juxtaposed this high ideal of a harmonic, utopian society of Rus' against [34]

12 In the Russian original: "Переехав чрез Волгу, увидишь себя прямо на святой Руси! Здесь говорят чисто по-русски, одеваются по-русски: ферези, жемчужные кокошники и русые косы прелестны! Чистота в домах восхитительна!"

Figure 1 Mikhail Nesterov "Holy Rus"' (1901). Source: Wikimedia Commons

an everyday reality of "sinful Russia". In his poem "To Russia" ("Rossii," 1839), Khomiakov explains what the divine purpose of the Russian Empire should be: Russia should display neither imperial grandeur, nor military exploits, nor the celebration of national glory, but rather humility, heartfelt simplicity and self-oblivion in the name of peace. Only on this basis can Russia become *primus inter pares* within the holy brotherhood of nations. Yet at the same time, Russia's mission to "embrace other nations with brotherly love" also means "to lead them into the light of the true faith", which, according to Khomiakov, the country still bears deep inside its heart. This twofold objective however can be easily (mis)interpreted as a mission to extend the realm of Russian Orthodoxy and to conceptualize the Russian Empire as the only world power whose political claims are justified by religious authenticity. Starting his poem with an appeal to renounce all kinds of national pride, Khomiakov paradoxically finishes it with an idea of Russian religious exclusiveness, which is hardly compatible with notions of humility and selflessness.[13]

Although the Slavophile tradition still defined Holy Rus' in terms of a messianic geopolitical [35] project, it nevertheless offered a shift in emphasis from the notion of Russianness to the attribute of holiness and from an expansionist, outward-looking "messianism of the mission" to an introverted "messianism of the covenant" (Smith 2008, 49). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the tension between the two messianisms remained a permanent motif

13 In the twentieth century, the idea of Holy Rus' as an epitome of religious exceptionalism was grasped and reformulated by the émigré philosopher Ivan Il'in (1883–1954), who, in his treatise on Russian nationalism (first published in 1950), claims that Holy Rus' equals to "Russia, which recognizes its faith as the main cause and distinctive feature of its earthly nature" (Il'in 2021, 1:333–41). Unlike other countries, this true and faithful Russia is not preoccupied with military exploits, economic growth or state-building, but rather seeks a spiritual renewal for the sake of a holy mission, which, according to Il'in, includes the homogenization of society, the fight against unspecified enemies as well as nurturing lesser nations that inhabit its territories (Il'in 2021, 1:333–41).

in the attempts to conceptualize Holy Rus' in philosophical writings and in the works of literature.[14]

Already in the twentieth century, the Russian émigré historian Aleksandr Solov'ev would summarize these attempts in his definition of Holy Rus' as a kind of Janus-faced entity (Solov'ev 1989, 68):[15] [36]

> One of its faces is the Third Rome, a proud idea of messianism, universal theocracy, world kingdom, active struggle, and victory. Another face is the city of Kitezh, the idea of humility and repentance, escape from all forms of state organization, from the evil of this world, from any struggle, the striving for the otherworld. [37]

With the reference to the city of Kitezh, which according to the popular legend became invisible when attacked by the Mongol hordes, Solov'ev addresses one of the greatest traumas in the pre-1917 history of the Russian Orthodoxy, i.e., the disaster of *raskol*—the schism of the Russian Orthodox Church which was triggered by the reforms of Patriarch Nikon in 1653 and which led to the subsequent persecution of the so called 'old believers' (i.e., the opponents of the reform) by the state. The legend of Kitezh, especially popular among the 'old believers', epitomizes the form of Orthodox Christianity that is not simply autonomous but also potentially hostile towards all kinds of government, yet defined as a legitimate part of the holistic idea of Holy Rus', it also counterbalances and saturates the inherently geopolitical thrust of Holy Rus' with equally important aspects of religious contemplation and moral self-improvement (it is said that only those who are pure in their heart and soul will find their way to Kitezh, see also Fig. 2). [38]

While many Russian writers and religious philosophers—from Fedor Dostoyevsky to Vladimir Solov'ev—offered their strategies for synthesizing these two models of messianism, it was ultimately the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke who managed to reduce their lengthy meditations to a proverbial statement with an utmost degree of religious and geopolitical ambiguity: while countries border on mountains, oceans and other countries, Russia borders on God. [39]

This strange formula, which seems ubiquitous in the contemporary popular writings, blogs, and songs about Holy Rus'[16], originates from Rilke's "literary fairy tale" (*Kunstmärchen*) with a title "How Treason Came to Russia", which belongs to the prose collection "Stories of God" (1900). However, in the original text this statement lacks its laconic brevity; on the contrary, it results from a lengthy dialogue between the narrator (recognizable as the author himself) and his friend Ewald. The latter is paralyzed and is therefore doomed to spend all his time motionless by the window of his house. Ewald is curious about the narrator's recent travel to Russia and is eager to learn more about this exotic and distant country, yet already the question about Russia's borders in the East and in the North remains unanswered. In fact, the narrator evades the question, saying that[17] [40]

14 For the implication of Holy Rus' in the realm of Russian foreign policy, see Curanović (2021, 75–76 and 142-143).

15 In the Russian original: "Один лик ее – Третий Рим, гордая идея мессианизма, вселенской теократии, всемирного царства, деятельной борьбы и победы. Другой лик – град Китеж, идея смирения и покаяния, бегства от государственных форм, от зла мира сего, от всякой борьбы, устремление в потусторонний мир."

16 For example, the song "Inok, voin i shut" ("A Monk, a Warrior, and a Jester", 1993) by the rock band "Alisa" features the reference to Rus', which borders on God (испокон веков граничит с Богом моя Светлая Русь). Interestingly enough, the song itself starts with the line "[Lord], bless our war!" (Благослови на войну!)

17 In the German original: „[…] das Ablesen von der Landkarte hat die Leute verdorben. Dort ist alles plan und eben, und wenn sie die vier Weltgegenden bezeichnet haben, scheint ihnen alles getan. Ein Land ist

Figure 2 Konsantin Gorbatov: “The Invisible City of Kitezh” (1913). Source: Wikimedia Commons

> people are spoiled by reading maps; on a map everything appears flat and even, and when the four compass directions are marked, it seems to people that everything is already done. But a country differs from an atlas. It has mountains and lowlands. It has to rest on something at the top and bottom. [41]

While Ewald is clueless about such kind of borders, the narrator suddenly suggests that Russia borders on God. Although Ewald is perplexed about the idea of God as a country, he is still curious of whether this supernatural neighborhood is visible in Russia. [42]

To illustrate God's presence, the narrator offers Ewald a folk tale (*bylina*): In this tale, "the terrible Tsar Ivan" threatens his Eastern neighbors with a "big war" unless they accept his supremacy and send him twelve tons of gold. The unnamed easterners in turn require that he answer three riddles in three years' time. The Tsar asks all the wise men and counsellors, beheading all those who fail to deliver the answer. Three years go by in such a fashion and the Tsar must meet the eastern kings, although he hasn't solved the riddles yet. On his way to the meeting place, he suddenly encounters an old peasant who is building a church (seemingly in the middle of nowhere) and who apparently knows the solutions to the riddles. The old peasant, after some hesitation, requests one barrel of gold in return for the answers, to which the Tsar consents. But having received the treasures the Tsar becomes greedy: instead of rewarding the peasant, he sends a messenger, who gives the old man a barrel of sand with only a little gold on top. The peasant sees through this lie, gives a moralizing lesson, and vanishes. The messenger later on describes this peasant as "God himself." [43]

Without mentioning the concept as such, Rilke's text offers several key ingredients of the literary discourse about Holy Rus'.[18] Here, the reader encounters Ivan IV (the Terrible) of Moscow, whose evil rule once gave Andrei Kurbskii an impetus for envisaging Holy Rus' as an entity opposite to the Muscovite state. Furthermore, it features the figure of God, who, dressed as a Russian peasant, literally turns into the Russian God—the bearer of eternal wisdom and righteousness (in the German original: *Wahrheit und Rechtlichkeit*), which are juxtaposed with Ivan's sinful reign. Yet it is also a story of territorial expansion and political domination—the Tsar rides eastwards (i.e., precisely in the direction where the Russian borders seem to become invisible) in order to collect tribute from his foreign vassals and meets God on his way. Against the backdrop of this encounter, the figures of the conquered rulers and nations are not simply unidentifiable in ethnic, religious or cultural terms, they become programmatically irrelevant—the reader does not even learn the content of the riddles, which were proposed by the eastern kings, as this content is ignored by the narrator throughout the course of the story. The conquest and subjugation of the Oriental Other function merely as a pre-text for a moralizing story about problematic relations between the Russian state and the Russian God.[19] [44]

doch aber kein Atlas. Es hat Berge und Abgründe. Es muss doch auch oben und unten an etwas stoßen." (Rilke 1965, 309–10)

18 In the German original, Rilke speaks of *Russland* (Russia) throughout the text, but in the Russian translations of his piece this geographical name appears in two different forms—in the dialogue between the narrator and Ewald it is Rossiia (Russia), but in the tale about the Tsar and the old peasant it is Rus'. Finally, the title of the story—*Wie der Verrat nach Russland kam*—in its Russian translation features Rus', not Russia (Как на Руси появилась измена, see for example the translation by Elena Ogneva). This adaptation of Rilke's text to the conventions of the home-grown Russian discourse of Holy Rus' as well as the sheer popularity of the formula of Russia which borders on God illustrate a particular case of self-exoticization, where Russia's deliberate othering in a foreign literary text becomes an important part of the country's cultural and religious self-perception.

19 Interestingly enough, Rilke's formula "Russia borders on God" echoes another proverbial expression about Russia as a country which is governed by God directly. In the Russian patriotic tradition, the latter aphorism

Moreover, the two parts of "How Treason Came to Russia" illustrate how the rational re- [45]
flection about Russia's geographical expansion and inner composition (i.e., ultimately a reflection about Russia's coloniality), which seems to take off in the first part of Rilke's text, quickly comes to its limits and is abandoned in favor of a pseudo-archaic literary form and a metaphysical message.

The obfuscation of contacts between Holy Rus' and its religious Others was to some extent [46]
compensated by Russian captivity narratives about the Caucasus and Central Asia, which comprise an important segment of colonial discourse in Russian literature (Layton 1994; Grant 2009; Maggs 2010). While Aleksandr Pushkin's poem "The Prisoner of the Caucasus" (1822) as well as Lev Tolstoy's novella of the same name (1872) lack a clear religious dimension, other works, like Nikolai Leskov's "The Enchanted Wanderer" (1875), are, on the contrary, permeated with motifs of Christian spirituality and capitalize on the folkloristic forms of narration as well as on the Orthodox tradition of martyrological and hagiographical texts about "passion bearers" (страстотерпцы).[20] In their own way, the narratives of Russian captives and martyrs mirror the Janus-faced nature of Holy Rus': On the one hand, they focus on the figures of imperial soldiers, who came to conquer and colonize distant and exotic lands, but on the other hand, these stories center around the heroes' "passive" suffering, Christian convictions, and the purity of heart rather than around military exploits. The martyr's victory over captors and tormentors is not a military but a moral one. Within the framework of the literary discourse about Holy Rus', the symbolic space of Christian martyrdom becomes a specific place where the history of Russian imperial expansion fuses with the stories of unshakable faith and deeply embedded Christian ideals: In other words, the martyrdom is precisely the place where the Third Rome becomes the city of Kitezh.

Particularly important in this context is the story of the soldier Foma Danilov, who was [47]

is usually ascribed to Burkhard Christoph von Münnich (1683–1767), a Russian field marshal of German descent who is quoted as saying, „Russia is ruled directly by the Lord, otherwise it is impossible to explain how this state even exists." In written form, however, this quote can only be traced back to his son, Johann Ernst von Münnich (1707–1788), who uttered it in a conversation with the German Protestant theologian Anton Friedrich Büsching (1724–1793). In Büsching's memoirs, this quote clearly acquires an ironic undertone: von Münnich Jr., who was the chief of the Russian customs office, points here at the absence of effective public administration in the Russian Empire (Büsching 1789, 489). Nevertheless, the idea of Russia being ruled by God became firmly anchored in Russian patriotic discourse. Recently, this quote has featured in Vladimir Putin's interview for the Russian documentary "The World Order 2018" (Миропорядок 2018), in which he repeats von Münnich's proverbial phrase without a trace of irony (see Миропорядок 2018, 1:25:33–1:26:08). On the contrary, in the same interview, while commenting on Russia's nuclear doctrine, Putin displays the effective readiness for an extended nuclear suicide on Russia's part by suggesting that a world without Russia would be meaningless anyway. In this context, Russia (which is ruled by God) is not a state plagued by corruption and ineffective administration, but the sacred Last Kingdom; its fall would consummate the end of humanity's spiritual history.

20 Despite its religious fable, Leskov's novel differs from the majority of literary texts discussed in this article. Although Leskov's contemporaries occasionally defined "The Enchanted Wanderer" as a national epos, and the prominent critic Lev Anninskii even described the novel's protagonist, the monk Ivan, as "an epitome of Russianness" (Leskov 1993, 5:54), the novel itself in many ways problematizes Russian colonial endeavors instead of valorizing them. Indeed, in the course of the novel Ivan is enslaved by the Tatars for ten years, but while embracing the language and customs of his captors he firmly sticks to his Christian faith and even manages to convert the Tatars to Christianity by threatening them with fireworks; still Ivan's story does not establish any clear link to the superiority of the Russian nation or to the *mission civilisatrice* of the Russian Empire. As Kenneth Lantz argues, Leskov's protagonist rather illustrates "a basic, living form of Christianity" (Lantz 1979, 87) which differs from the officially endorsed Russian Orthodoxy. Similarly, Walter Benjamin's reading of "The Enchanted Wanderer" highlights Leskov's criticism of the narrow-minded church bureaucracy and the mercilessness of Russian autocracy (Benjamin 1963, 82). More importantly, the unique 'folkish' style of narration applied by Leskov, the so-called *skaz*, lacks the high-flown rhetoric typical for the texts about Holy Rus'—in fact, the term itself is mentioned only in one episode of the novel, when the protagonist drinks vodka with his fellow countrymen.

captured by the Qipchaq insurgents in the Fergana valley in 1875 during the Russian conquest of the Kokand Khanate. Reportedly, the Qipchaqs threatened Danilov and demanded his conversion to Islam. Danilov refused and was then tortured to death. Though no one was present to witness his heroic act, a newspaper article from *Ruskii invalid* provided a detailed account of Danilov's execution, focusing on both the sadistic habits of the locals as well as on the Christian conviction of a simple Russian soldier, who is even quoted in the article as saying that he was born with his faith and would die with it. According to *Russkii invalid*, the "natives" (*tuzemtsy*) were amazed at his steadfastness in the face of torture and death and therefore termed him *batyr* (epic hero). Apart from the story of torture, the article unequivocally celebrates the annexation of Kokand by the Russian army under general Skobelev: While the exaggerated brutality of the "Asians" seemed to legitimize Russian invasion, the natives' appreciation of the *batyr* already implied a certain acceptance of Russian military presence in the newly conquered region (Gao 2016, 29).

[48] Without questioning the veracity of the report in Russkii invalid, one still has to admit that in terms of its narrative representation the martyrdom of Foma Danilov strongly resembles the hagiographic accounts of canonized Orthodox martyrs from the time of the Mongol invasion of Rus' in the thirteenth century (e.g., the stories of Vasilko Konstantinovich of Rostov, who was captured after the Battle of the Sit river in 1238, or the vita of Mikhail Vsevolodovich of Chernigov, who was tortured to death by the Mongols in 1246 for his refusal to venerate their deities).

[49] Danilov was, in fact, never officially canonized as martyr or saint by the Russian Orthodox Church. Instead he was "canonized" by another powerful institution—Russian literature. Fedor Dostoyevsky was deeply impressed by the report in *Russkii invalid*, and in the 1877 issue of "A Writer's Diary" offered his own interpretation, describing Danilov's martyrdom as the "genuine image of the whole of our People's Russia", where there is "no falsity, no compromise with the conscience", but only "an astounding, primitive, elementary honesty" (Dostoevsky 1997, 2: 1877-1881:822–23). Unlike the traditional hagiographic texts, which often depict a martyr's death as a holy and therefore exceptional deed, Dostoyevsky insists that the Russian people have Foma Danilovs by the thousands. Thus, for the writer Foma is not a special, but a typical hero: Dostoyevsky suspects that as a soldier Foma Danilov must have lived a very ordinary life, and probably even caroused, drank, and did not pray a good deal in his time (Dostoevsky 1997, 2: 1877-1881:822–23). Yet the deeply embedded religious ideals of the people surfaced in him when he was captured and asked to convert to Islam (Ivanits 2008, 151–52).

[50] However, Dostoyevsky's interpretation of the incident in Central Asia is directed profoundly towards the West. In his polemic fervor, the writer not only juxtaposes Danilov's martyrdom with the supposed sophistry of Russian enlightened, liberal, Europe-oriented intelligentsia, but also explicitly compares the outbreaks of popular Russian patriotism in the years 1875–77 (i.e., during Russian military campaigns in Central Asia and in the Balkans) to the selflessness and religious conviction of the Medieval crusaders.

[51] Dostoyevsky returns to the story of Foma Danilov again in his final novel "The Brothers Karamazov" (1880), where he stages a discussion between Fedor Karamazov's servant Grigory, a deeply religious man, and his opponent, Smerdyakov, who is an embodiment of nihilistic reason. Grigory brings out the news about a Russian soldier captured by Asians and "flayed alive". This leads to disputation between the two characters: While Grigory admires the soldier's heroism, Smerdyakov asserts that the captive could have given up his faith in

order to save his life. The mere thought of renouncing Christianity, according to Smerdyakov, would have immediately separated him from Christ, and he would thus not have committed any sin as a Christian. Weakness of faith is in any case the most ordinary of sin and the overall condition of mankind, because no longer can anyone command nature to perform such miracles as moving mountains — except perhaps, as he concedes, much to the delight of Feodor Karamazov, one or two hermits in the desert. The importance of this point is stressed when Feodor asks the young Alyosha Karamazov, "That's the Russian faith all over, isn't it?", meaning obviously that even a nihilist like Smerdyakov reserves at least some room for the miracles of faith in his otherwise materialistic worldview, and Alyosha agrees, "that's purely Russian."

The Collapse

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of Holy Rus' becomes a literary commonplace which may refer to a myth (both romantic and nationalist) or a conservative utopia (which provides the Russian monarchy with additional legitimacy), but which also functions as a common denomination for a multifaceted intellectual mission to transfigure Russia's increasingly secular culture into a religious one (Strickland 2013, 53). This anti-modernist gesture resonates with Russia's shifting self-positioning as an empire and a nation-state. If, following Benedict Anderson, we define Russian nationalism as an effort at „stretching the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire" (Anderson 1991, 86), then the poetic sacralization of geographical space was certainly one of the most successful of its poetic techniques. However, the sacralization of Russian national territory, as it can be observed in the literary discourse about Holy Rus', was always accompanied by the sacralization of the Empire, with Fedor Tiutchev's "Russian geography" ("Russkaia geografiia", 1849) probably the most compelling literary example[21]: [52]

> Seven internal seas and seven great rivers… From the Nile to the Neva, from the Elbe to China, [53]
> From the Volga to the Euphrates, from the Ganges to the Danube…
> This is the Russian Tsardom… and it will never pass away,
> Just as the Spirit foretold and as Daniel prophesied.

Poetically overamplified and geographically overstretched, this heavenly empire however did not survive World War I and collapsed in 1917, burying the established literary paradigms of national holiness under its vast debris. The farewell to the previous poetic tradition of nation building was neither romantic nor sentimental. In „The Twelve" (1918), Aleksandr Blok puts the following words into the mouth of a Bolshevik soldier[22]: [54]

> Comrade, hold on to your gun, be brave! [55]
> Let's put a bullet into Holy Rus' –
> Into ancient, sturdy,

21 In Russian: "Семь внутренних морей и семь великих рек… / От Нила до Невы, от Эльбы до Китая, / От Волги по Евфрат, от Ганга до Дуная… / Вот царство русское… и не прейдет вовек, Как то провидел Дух и Даниил предрек."

22 In Russian: "Товарищ, винтовку держи, не трусь! / Пальнем-ка пулей в Святую Русь / В кондовую, / В избяную, / В толстозадую!" (cit. Blok 1955, 1:526–27).

Wood-hutted,
Fat-assed Rus'!

The bullet, once fired, accidentally hits a "fat-faced" prostitute with whom one of the soldiers had been in love. This murderous episode notwithstanding, in the last stanza of the poem, most controversially, a figure of Jesus Christ appears in the snowstorm, heading the march of the twelve Bolsheviks through the streets of revolutionary Petrograd, thus linking them to the twelve apostles… [56]

Being virtually banished from Soviet Russia for its incompatibility with Marxist ideology, Holy Rus' as a literary trope and metahistorical concept survived in the Russian *émigré* communities of Western and Central Europe, where it inspired a significant amount of publications, even though one of the most famous Russian *émigré* philosophers, Nikolai Berdiaev, described the very idea of Holy Rus' and the respective literary production as "deadened tradition" (омертвевшее предание) already in 1915.[23] [57]

Yet, in the early 1930s, the old imperial paradigms were picked up again in Moscow itself in order to remaster the newly established Soviet Union not only as the bearer of a revolutionary idea but also as a state with a pronounced missionary consciousness (prophetically identified by Blok in "The Twelve"), hegemonic aspirations and with a claim for a superpower status. The new Soviet anthem (written around 1938 and adopted in 1944), which replaced the left-wing "Internationale", already in its first lines refers to the archaic idea of Rus' as a guarantee for the viability of the Soviet state[24]: [58]

An unbreakable union of free republics, [59]
The Great Rus' has welded forever to stand.

While the Russian God never fully recovered from compulsory Soviet atheism and ultimately perished from the Russian literary landscape, the great and holy Rus', on the contrary, outlived the Soviet state and set up for a turbulent post-Soviet afterlife.[25] [60]

Holy Rus' after 1991

With the breakdown of the Soviet Union, Holy Rus' was reintegrated into Russian intellectual discourse as forgotten and rediscovered national heritage, reinforcing the idea of spiritual connections between all Russians, far beyond the borders of the newly established Russian Federation. Directly addressing the trauma of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Holy Rus' thus quickly occupied a place at the fore of an anti-Western cohort of geopolitical concepts (e.g., Eurasianism, the Russian World, Novorossiia), forming a paradoxical alliance with the ideas of Communist comeback as well as with the revisionist aspirations of Russian nationalists. [61]

Probably the most illustrious example is provided by a book by Gennadii Ziuganov enti- [62]

23 Original publication: Омертвевшее предание. Биржевые ведомости. 8 апр. 1915. - №14771. Reprinted in: Berdiaev (2004, 102–4).

24 In Russian: Союз нерушимый республик свободных / Сплотила навеки Великая Русь.

25 In the Soviet period, Holy Rus' was an object of historical and philological research (e.g., in the works by Sergei Averincev), but it also featured in the underground religious literature, where the interpretations of Holy Rus' echoed the Russian *émigré* discourse (e.g., the texts of Anton Kartashev, Aleksandr Shmeman, Ivan Il'in and others) by offering an alternative, non-Soviet collective identity. Due to the space limitations, this literary production has to remain beyond the scope of this paper; however, it should be acknowledged that this topic may offer some important questions for further research, especially in the context of religious revival in the late Soviet Union.

tled *Holy Rus' and Koshchei's Kingdom* (Святая Русь и Кощеево Царство, 2003). Since 1993, Ziuganov had been the head of the Communist Party of Russia (the direct successor to the former CPSU) and undoubtedly remains one of the leading Russian politicians of the last three decades. In his book, Ziuganov describes Holy Rus' as an island of the blessed, surrounded by the sinister forces of the globalizing West. The latter is associated with the figure of Koshchei (Кощей)—a character from Russian mythology who usually appears as an ugly old man or as an undead (although on the book cover he is depicted, rather surprisingly, as an Oriental-looking warrior or king, see also 3).

In Ziuganov's book, this fairytale figure evokes the feeling of a permanent threat to Holy Rus'. In the struggle against the realm of evil, Rus' could only survive if it returned to its imperial tradition and here in particular to the heritage of the Soviet Union of Stalinist era, which is preserved by Ziuganov and his party. In sharp contrast to Stalinist state-mandated atheism, however, the book emphasizes the spiritual values of true (orthodox) Christianity and offers a series of religiously coveted motifs to underline Russia's incompatibility with the West. Beyond the usual criticism of globalization, Ziuganov's writing signifies a farewell to the Marxist-enlightenment and internationalist rhetoric of the Soviet era, which is rejected in favor of a mystical and fantastic contextualization of Russian domestic and foreign policy. The symbiosis of Orthodox Christianity with Stalinism may seem paradoxical, if not fully absurd, at first glance, but this connection, which Ziuganov politically exploits in his book, was also modeled and probed in a fictionalized context by prominent writers such as Eduard Limonov, Aleksandr Prochanov and Zakhar Prilepin (Sproede and Zabirko 2015). [63]

Apart from being the new version of ideological confrontation with the West, the notion of Holy Rus' offered a tool for the new configuration of the post-Soviet space as early as the 1990s, addressing the religious dimension of the collapse of the USSR and especially the crack in the matrix of Russian 'sacral geography', which appeared after the creation of an independent Ukrainian state. As Serhii Plokhy (2000, 370–71) observes: [64]

> The "sacred space" of the empire, the cultural and historical map created by the Russian imperial nationalists of the nineteenth century and Russian proletarian internationalists of the Soviet era was torn apart by the events of 1991 (…). When the independent Ukraine left the USSR, it effectively took a number of the major imperial "sacred places" prominently present on the Russian cultural map. They included traditional "all-Russian" places of religious worship and pilgrimage, such as the Caves Monastery and St Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, and places associated with the history of the Russian empire during its "golden age" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like Poltava and Sevastopol. [65]

The most prominent reply to this state of affairs is ascribed to archimandrite Lavrentii of Chernigov (1868–1950), who is often quoted as saying: [66]

> As it is impossible to separate the Holy Trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – they are the One God, so it is [equally] impossible to separate Russia, Ukraine and Belarus – together they are Holy Rus'. [67]

Although the authorship of this statement cannot be established and the link to archimandrite Lavrentii remains rather questionable, since conservative circles among Orthodox Christians ascribe a huge amount of prophecies, sayings and quotes to this particular hierarch, the typical combination of religious and geopolitical rhetoric under the auspices of Holy Rus' [68]

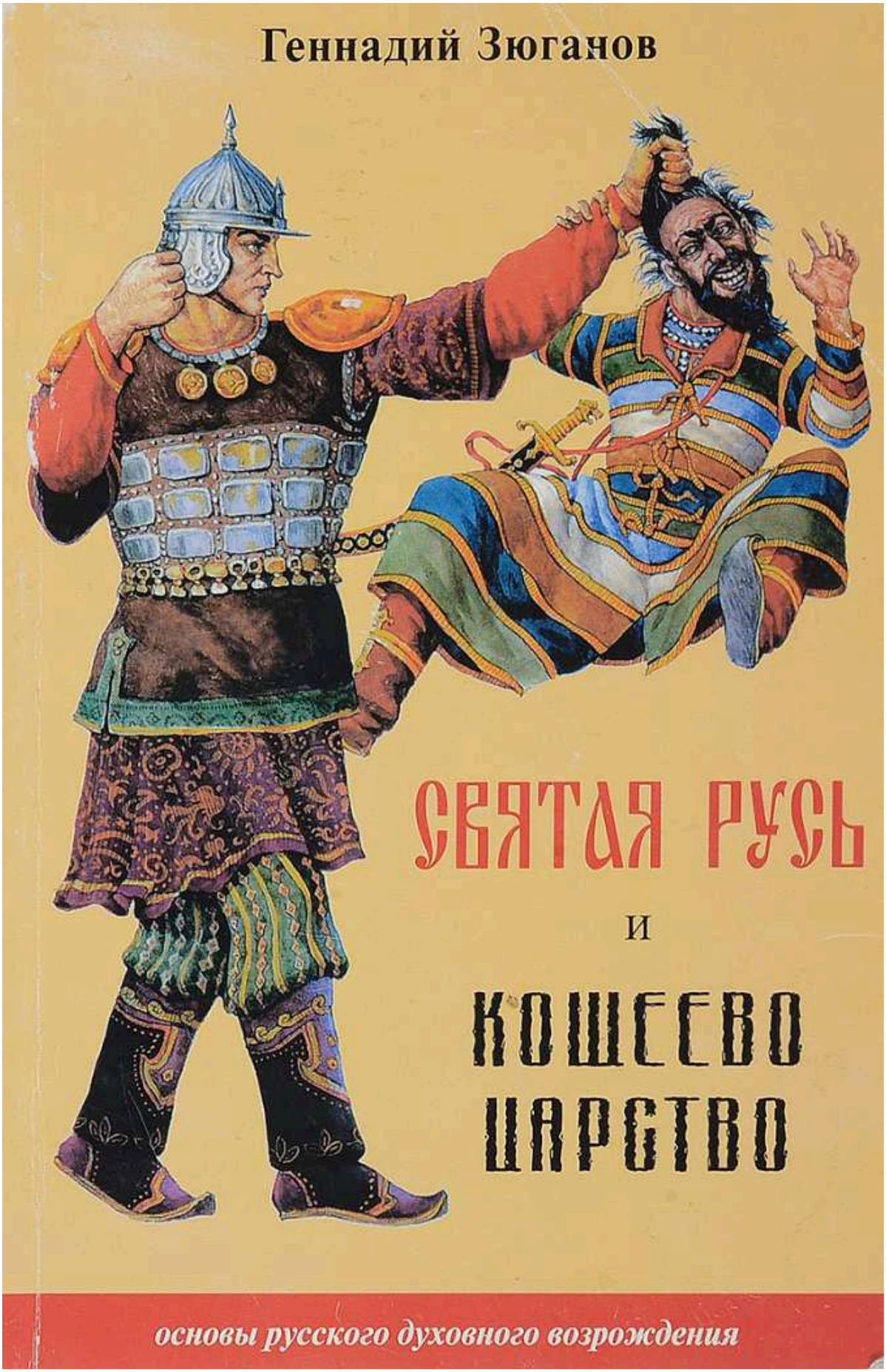

Figure 3 "Holy Rus' and Koshchei's Kingdom: the Basis for Russian Spiritual Renaissance" by Gennadii Ziuganov (book cover).

certainly boosted the popularity of the proverbial statement "Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus – together they are Holy Rus'" (Россия, Украина, Беларусь – вместе они святая Русь).

This formula obviously has its origins in the idea of a 'triune nation' of the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, which was coined by Russian imperial authorities in the nineteenth century already to oppose the menace of Polish nationalism in the western borderlands of the empire. Yet, it also echoes the discourses of the late Perestroika and the desire to preserve the "Slavic core" of the collapsing Soviet Union, as proposed, for example, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his infamous essay "How Shall We Organize Russia?" (Как нам обустроить Россию?, 1990). Instead of defending the doomed USSR, Solzhenitsyn celebrates its inevitable dissolution and sees a chance to establish a completely new, homogeneous state in the departure of the twelve Soviet republics with non-Slavic majority (Solzhenitsyn 1995, 1:541):[26] [69]

> And now, when those twelve are gone, the only thing that remains is what can be called Rus', as it has been called for a long time (the word "Russian" has embraced the Little Russian, the Great Russians and Belarusians [i.e., Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians – O.Z.] for centuries), or Russia (the name from the 18th century), or, in the right sense now: Russian Union. [70]

While the idea of a new Russian Union remained unrealized (with the notable exception of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, proclaimed in 1999), the mission of defending the spiritual unity of the Eastern Slavs remained firmly in the hands of the Russian Orthodox Church and its Patriarchs. Particularly Patriarch Kirill, since his enthronization in 2009, actively promoted Holy Rus' as a geopolitical concept, willingly projecting the geographical designation in his title—Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'—onto the geopolitical realities of the post-Soviet space. Kirill also carefully avoids using the word "Russia" as a synonym of Holy Rus', pointing out that "Russia" is only a part of Rus'. [71]

In his thorough analysis of Kirill's geopolitical rhetoric, Mikhail Suslov concludes that in the speeches of the Patriarch, Holy Rus' features as "cultural and spiritual core" of the Russian nation, which refers primarily to the system of values that has formed around the "striving for holiness" (Suslov 2014, 69). According to Kirill, Holy Rus' is not based on ethnicity because it encompasses the non-Slavic peoples of Kazakhstan and Moldova. In geographical terms, Holy Rus' comprises the "backbone" of the so-called Russian World, which includes the Russian diaspora or, more broadly, all people who, irrespective of their citizenship or place of living, are united by the Orthodox Christian faith, the Russian language, and a shared historical memory. At the same time, the Patriarch offers a certain degree of clarity regarding the delimitation of Holy Rus' as a topographical space, when he speaks about canonical borders of his church:[27] [72]

> The Patriarch is the custodian of the internal unity of the Church and, together [73]

26 In the Russian original: "И вот за вычетом этих двенадцати – только и останется то, что можно назвать Русь, как называли издавна (слово "русский" веками обнимало малороссов, великороссов и белорусов), или – Россия (название с XVIII века), или, по верному смыслу теперь: Российский Союз."

27 In Russian: "Патриарх – хранитель внутреннего единства Церкви и вместе с собратьями по епископату блюститель чистоты веры. […] Патриарх – защитник внешних канонических рубежей Церкви. Это служение приобретает особое значение в той ситуации, которая возникла после образования независимых государств на пространстве «исторической Руси». Уважая их суверенитет и радея о благе каждого из этих государств, Патриарх в то же время призван заботиться о сохранении и укреплении духовных связей между населяющими их народами во имя сбережения той системы ценностей, которую являет миру единая православная цивилизация Святой Руси." In: *Slovo Sviateishego Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Kirilla posle intronizacii 1 fevralia 2009 goda*. Last accessed 05 December 2020. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/547287.html.

> with his brothers in the episcopate, guardian of the purity of the faith […]. The Patriarch is the defender of the canonical borders of the church. This ministry takes on special significance in that situation that arose after the formation of independent states on the territory of 'historic Rus'. While respecting their sovereignty and caring for their well-being, the Patriarch is called, at the same time, to be concerned with the maintaining and strengthening of spiritual ties between people living in these countries for the sake of preserving the system of values which the one Orthodox civilization of Holy Rus' reveals to the world.

[74] Similar to the logic of the prominent 'civilizational' theories (e.g., the one proposed by Samuel Huntington), the contextualization of Holy Rus' as a separate civilizational domain inevitably implies its definition as a topographically limited formation—one among several other similarly autonomous 'civilizations'. But as Mikhail Suslov aptly notices, the concept of Holy Rus' also allows for an opposed interpretation, connected with a broader understanding of the "covenant" as the cultural basis of the nation. To explain such a covenant, Kirill develops the concept of a "base culture", i.e., a system of values that are fundamental for a given community and which rest on basic moral and religious postulates. The return to such "base culture" would smooth over the contradictions between nations belonging to different "civilizations" because in its main features the "base culture" of all traditional religions is one and the same. However, a utopian sense of unity of traditional cultures and religions implies their joint struggle against a universal Other—the liberal, secularized world of the modern era. Thus, in a somewhat paradoxical way, Kirill's interpretation of Holy Rus' leads us back to the beginnings of the concept's literary career, i.e., to the writings of Petr Viazemskii and Vasilii Zhukovksii. Similar to these early literary manifestations of Holy Rus', Kirill's rhetorical struggle against secularism and liberalism has a backlash on the very idea of cultural and religious heterogeneity. Suslov (2014, 81) argues that

> [75] the inner motive that underlies the imagining of "Holy Rus" is the desire to find an essential unity and, consequently, a possibility of integration in a space that is ordinarily viewed as a space of differences, whether on the territory of the former Soviet Union or in Europe as a whole. This radical annihilation of colonial distance and the resolution of Slavophile dilemmas are possible thanks to the interpretation of "Holy Rus" as the center and foundation of "Christian civilization" – that is, through an appeal to messianism and fundamentalism.

[76] As a geopolitical concept promoted by the Patriarch, Holy Rus' received a heavy blow in 2014 with the start of Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which led, among other things, to a split within world Orthodoxy and to the establishing of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine, recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate.[28]

[77] Yet even before 2014 the interpretation of Holy Rus' as a concept was constantly chal-

28 Paradoxically, Russia's full-scale military onslaught against Ukraine, which started in February 2022, in a way 'resolved' this tension by providing a certain clarity with regard to Ukraine's belonging to Holy Rus'. While some observers noticed that "Russia has demonstrated almost religious fervour in its current war against Ukraine" (Mälksoo 2022, 5) and that "Putin's invasion became a holy war for Russia" (Jenkins 2022), it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that from the standpoint of Holy Rus', the Russian military campaign against Ukraine is, above all, a war against the apostates. To be sure, the notion of 'Ukrainian apostasy' can hardly be defined in theological or political terms, after all, Ukraine's quest for democracy and western geopolitical orientation is by no means unprecedented in the world of 'fraternal Orthodox nations'. One may think here of Greece, Romania or Bulgaria, which are member states of both EU and

lenged from within the Russian Orthodoxy—it was challenged both by the lower clergy and by laymen alike, who eagerly provide alternative ways of defining and contextualizing Holy Rus'.

[78] The story and the religious cult of the martyred soldier Evgenii Rodionov may serve as an example here. Rodionov and three of his comrades (Andrei Trusov, Igor Iakovlev and Aleksandr Zheleznov) were killed during the war in Chechnya in 1996, after having been taken prisoner while guarding a border checkpoint. Allegedly Evgenii was beheaded by the Chechen warlord Ruslan Khaikhoroev because he refused to convert to Islam and take off the cross which he wore around his neck. The story of Evgenii's death has been narrated and commented on in the mass media and is widely known throughout Russia. In countless brochures, sermons and online blogs, the story of Evgenii Rodionov turned into a mixture of religious veneration and national patriotism.

[79] The voluminous hagiographic discourse includes Evgenii's vita texts and an elaborated hymnography (both Akathistos and service texts for the Vigil and the Liturgy) in Church Slavonic. Moreover, icons are dedicated to him which portray him wearing a *paludamentum*, the red coat of Roman legionaries (typical for the icons of early Christian soldiers martyred under Diocletian) over the modern military uniform (see Fig. 4).

[80] Already in the late 1990s, soldiers and other laymen but also parts of the clergy started to demand his canonization. However, this demand quickly became a question of high political explosiveness: in the light of Evgenii Rodionov's martyrdom, the Russian military campaign in Chechnya, officially defined as "protection of the constitutional order," could easily be reinterpreted as a full-blown religious war. Thus the responsible Synodal Commission of the Patriarchy until today denies Evgenii's official canonization, although it de facto accepts his status as "locally venerated saint" (местночтимый святой). This typical formula for veneration of those whom the Church has not yet officially canonized sounds like a strange euphemism in the case of Evgenii's cult, which had spread from Russia over Ukraine to Moldova and, reportedly, even to Serbia.

[81] Equally complicated is the relation of Evgenii's worshippers to the Russian state. The story of his kidnapping includes evidence of deception and even criminal behavior of the Russian military authorities, which initially reported that Evgenii had deserted. However, Evgenii's mother, Liubov Rodionova, refused to believe the official reports. She sold her apartment in the town of Podolsk and travelled to Chechnya, where she received no support from the

NATO and, at the same time, share an Orthodox religious identity. Yet unlike Ukraine, none of these countries has ever been poetically 'colonized' and imagined as a part of such a spiritual and geopolitical entity as Holy Rus'. Moreover, the trope of 'Ukrainian apostasy' or 'treason' is firmly anchored in the Russian master narrative. Its genealogy can be traced back to the figure of Ukrainian Hetman (Cossack leader) Ivan Mazepa, who, during the Great Nordic War (1700-1721), defected from the Russian army and sided with King Charles XII of Sweden. The Russian Orthodox Church laid an anathema on Mazepa's name in 1708. In Russian imperial discourse, the term *mazepinstvo* became an established rhetorical device for presenting Ukraine as substantially part of non-Orthodox or Catholic (Polish, 'Jesuit') culture that has been treacherously driven into the body of Rus' in order to undermine its stability (Sproede 2022, 83; Kappeler 2003, 36). In the genealogical tree of 'Ukrainian betrayal', the place of Mazepa was later taken by Symon Petliura, the military leader of the Ukrainian People's Republic during Ukraine's short-lived sovereignty in 1918–1921, and finally by Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), the head of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Today, in Russian patriotic discourse, these three historical figures (as well as their followers) comprise a collective image of "Ukrainian Judas". From this backdrop, the calls of some Western politicians and public intellectuals to stop the ongoing war in the name of the common Orthodox faith or Slavic brotherhood appear rather naïve (albeit well-intended). The war of apostasy is always an existential conflict, a war of annihilation. In the case of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is also a war for the purity of Holy Rus' as an imagined community—a deadly quest for consolidation in the face of the Global West.

Figure 4 The Icon of Evgenii Rodionov from the Church of St. Luke (Belgrade, Serbia). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Russian military commanders, who, on the contrary, behaved in an arrogant fashion when she inquired about the whereabouts of her son. She finally lost her faith in the army of her own country and went to the Chechen side; she paid the insurgents for information and was given the facts about his death and burial site. In his detailed and insightful analysis of the media discourse about Evgenii Rodionov's martyrdom, Per-Arne Bodin stresses the urge to victimize the hero and the hero's mother (who reportedly excavated the body of her son with her bare hands). The bias towards victimization, although understandable and logical in light of religiously motivated execution, leads to an assumption that within the narrative of Evgenii's martyrdom "the Russian army, Russian civil authorities are the enemy no less than the real opponent, in this case the Chechens" (Bodin 2009, 140).

[82] After the circumstances of his death became known, Evgenii Rodionov was posthumously awarded the Russian Order of Valor and a series of other military awards; but in light of Liubov Rodionova's narrative, these symbolic gestures appear as hopelessly belated, if not half-hearted attempts to 'compensate' the mourning mother and to integrate the veneration of Evgenii into the official memory discourse about the war in Chechnya.

[83] Since such integration remained problematic, the story of the executed son and his mourning mother received a lot of attention in the circles of various ultra-religious and xenophobic groups, which gradually appropriated the figure of the martyr for their purposes. Particularly visible in this context was the activity of the members of the so-called Izborskii Klub—an explicitly anti-liberal think tank founded and chaired by the writer Aleksandr Prokhanov. Prokhanov is also a chief editor of the daily newspaper *Zavtra*, which is widely known in Russia for its radically chauvinistic, anti-democratic tone, yet was also one of the first newspapers to report extensively on the fate of Evgenii Rodionov as well as on the circumstances of his kidnapping and death. Unsurprisingly, Evgenii's martyrdom appears at the very core of Prokhanov's doctrine of the so-called "Fifth Empire"—an evolving geopolitical giant and the successor to the four previous Russian "empires": Kievan Rus', the Principality of Moscow, the Romanov's Russia and the Soviet Union. Within the framework of his spiritualistic vision, Prokhanov crowns Evgenii Rodionov as "the first saint on the iconostasis of the future Fifth Empire" (Prokhanov and Kugushev 2007, 272).

[84] While Prokhanov's glorification of Evgenii's martyrdom remained restricted to the realms of literature and political journalism, other nationalists and proponents of the Russian imperial idea are working hard to achieve Evgenii's canonization by the Russian Orthodox Church. In a poem written by Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich, the leader of the ultranationalist "Union of the Orthodox Banner-Bearers", the official Church is severely criticized for its reluctance to canonize Evgenii Rodionov, whereas the young soldier himself, featuring in the poem under a diminutive Zhenia, is elevated to nothing less than a savior of Rus' (quoted in Bodin 2009, 150–51):[29]

[85] And let it be known that there's a Miracle in this world,
That not everything in Rus' has been sold,
That having conquered Death, from thence
Zhenia now brings us Resurrection.
That there remains for us something sacred in this world,

29 In the Russian original: "И чтобы знать, что есть на свете Чудо, / Что на Руси распродано не всё, / Что победивши Смерть теперь оттуда / Нам Женя Воскресение несёт. / Что есть на свете нечто, что нам свято, / Как эти ветви плачущих берёз, / Что к нам вернутся Русские солдаты, / И их возглавит Сам Иисус Христос."

> Like these branches of weeping birches,
> That the Russian soldiers will return to us,
> With Jesus Christ himself at the fore.

In the above lines, the author deliberately establishes a continuity with the Russian literary tradition by placing Christ at the fore of the fallen Russian soldiers: this poetic image obviously corresponds to the figure of Christ marching with the Red Guards in Aleksandr Blok's poem "The Twelve". But unlike "The Twelve," where the appearance of Christ is both surprising and controversial (pointing, among other things, at the messianic fervor of the Bolshevik ideology), the poem of Simonovich-Nikshich provides a straightforward glorification of a national saint who died for a national cause. [86]

This particular interpretation links Evgenii's martyrdom to the death of Foma Danilov and the corresponding patriotic discourse pioneered by Dostoyevsky. The crucial point in both stories is the moment when a martyr refuses to take off his cross and to betray his faith. In the Akathistos (hymn) dedicated to Evgenii, this episode is narrated as follows (Bodin 2009, 142)[30]: [87]

> With fawning words from the true God, the beastlike tormentors wanted to estrange you, most glorified Evgenii, and tempt you with the evil faith of the Hagarites but bravely did you resist, saying: "I will not change my faith in Jesus Christ, my God, and I will forever sing to him and to the Father and to the Holy Spirit 'Alleluia!' " [88]

Despite the obvious similarity of the two narratives, the difference in function and development is rather striking. To begin with, neither in the article in *Russkii invalid* nor in the texts by Dostoyevsky can one find a demand to canonize Foma Danilov as a saint—indeed, such demands have been uttered only in the late 1990s, i.e., precisely in light of the martyrdom of Evgenii Rodionov; today, the two martyrs seem inseparable in the corresponding religious and patriotic discourses in the Russian-language segment of the Internet (e.g., Russkaia narodnaia liniia 2016). Indeed, the texts for the church service dedicated to Foma Danilov and Evgenii Rodionov, which are written in Church Slavonic, are very similar in terms of their literary tropes and structure: In both cases the foes are referred to as 'Hagarites,' which is a biblical name for the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula (the descendants of the biblical Hagar); the texts also emphasize the glory of the Fatherland and the patriotic conviction of both soldiers, thus functioning as propagandistic hymns rather than religious ones. For example, in the akathistos to Evgenii Rodionov the martyr is being praised as the one who "did not dishonor the Fatherland before the world and the people" (честь Отечествия твоего пред миром и люди не посрамивый) and who thus "confirmed the just cause of our army" (правое дело воинства нашего подтвердивый). [89]

More importantly, the literary figuration of two life stories seems to go in the opposite direction. While little was known about the life of Foma Danilov, Dostoyevsky carefully tries to portray him as an ordinary Russian soldier—a man made of flesh, blood, and a few bad habits. The life of Evgenii Rodionov, although well documented (e.g., via testimonies of his mother), on the contrary, is abandoned in favor of a story about birth, life and death of a saint [90]

30 In Church Slavonic: "Хотяще звероннравному мучителю льстивыми словесы отвратити тя, прехвальный Евгение, от Бога Истиннаго и в зловерие агарянское тя соблазнити, мужественне противостоял еси, глаголя: не изменю веры моея в Иисуса Христа, Бога Моего, Ему же со Отцем и Святым Духом присно пою и во веки пети буду: Аллилуйя!"

full of signs of holiness and divine predestination. As Per-Arne Bodin observes, the biography of a Russian teenager is transformed here into a hagiography and the interest in verifiable facts of Evgenii's life seems to have been lost. In the hagiographic discourse, Evgenii appears as God's soldier, and almost all details of modern life are erased. The other soldiers who were with him are hardly mentioned at all, or mentioned only as "izhe s nim," "the ones being with him" (Bodin 2009, 143–44). Liubov Rodionova's journey to Chechnya, which began as a desperate search for truth, thus ended with the creation of a religiously and politically twisted narrative about the life and death of her son.

The reasons for this particular transformation may be explained (at least partially) when the martyrdom of Evgenii is placed in the context of Holy Rus', as it is the case in the poem written by amateur poet Liudmila Larkina. The poem begins with a clear patriotic message:[31] [91]

> Nobody will ever put Russia to its knees! No enemy shall ever [hope to] achieve that. Here New Martyr Evgenii, Shines and keeps Holy Rus' safe. [92]

Starting from this typically pompous stanza, the poem then provides a catalogue of miracles performed by the martyr. Yet in the second part of the poem, the overall tone changes and the text centers the motives of grief and sorrow, which culminate in the lines where Russian victims of the Chechen war address Evgenii Rodionov (ibid.)[32]: [93]

> Here cry the mourning mothers from Beslan, And the fathers of fallen sons. And the whining wound of Nord-Ost - Everything hurts in my homeland. [94]

With the reference to the fallen soldiers as well as to the victims of two major terrorist attacks committed by the Chechen militant Islamists (the killing of teachers and pupils of the secondary school in the town of Beslan in 2004 and the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002), the poem ultimately reveals the 'compensatory' character of Evgenii's cult. While the Russian state continuously relies on well-known and propagandistically elaborated figures of warrior saints such as the holy princes Aleksandr Nevskij (1221–1263) and Dmitrii Donskoi (1350–1389), and the official church eagerly adds new military saints such as Admiral Fedor Ushakov (1745–1817) to the pantheon of Russian national heroes, the martyrdom of Evgenii Rodionov does not refer to any glorious chapter of Russian military history but to the painful memories of the disastrous military campaigns in Chechnya. For a state like Russia, which carefully, even obsessively, cultivates its military glory, the rare memorials to the veterans of the two recent Chechen wars indicate how difficult it is to integrate the catastrophic events of those wars into the official memory discourse of the contemporary Russia. [95]

Precisely in the sphere where the state and the official church fail to provide condolence, justice and hope for the better future, the figure of the "warrior Evgenii" and the notion of Holy Rus' offer some sort of emotional compensation. Albeit amateurish and kitschy, Larkina's poem grasps the dual nature of Holy Rus' as a concept when it separates imperial and nationalist motives inherent in the discourse about Holy Rus' from the motives of condolence and grief. Hence, in the last stanza of the poem, Holy Rus', as a country protected by Evgenii, suddenly changes its name and is referred to as sorrowful Rus' (страждущая Русь). [96]

31 In the Russian original: "Не склонить Россию на колени! / Враг на это не расчитывает пусть. / Вот и Новомученник Евгений, / Воссиял, храня Святую Русь." In: Larkina, Liudmila (2013): *Ne sklonit' Rossiiu na koleni*. Last accessed December 06, 2020. https://omiliya.org/content/ne-sklonit-rossiyu-na-koleni.html.

32 In the Russian original: "Плачут в горе матери Беслана, / И отцы погибших сыновей. / И Норд-Оста ноющая рана - / Всё болит у Родины моей."

Final Remarks

[97] Having travelled a long way from an epitome of Russianness (e.g., in the writings of Vasilii Zhukovskii or Fedor Glinka) to a geopolitical model for reintegration of the post-Soviet space, Holy Rus' in all its literary incarnations always offers new forms of articulating the idea of Russian national and religious exclusiveness. At the same time, it also provides a kind of "emergency parachute" for failing imperial projects, fostering, for example, the resurrection of Russian imperial ideas after the catastrophes of 1917 and 1991. The literary texts about Holy Rus' function as important points of reference for the (re-)construction of national and imperial concepts—they provide a key to an established and recognizable set of metaphors and rhetorical structures, thus enabling the institutionalization of Holy Rus' in the domains of collective and cultural memory of the East Slavic countries.

[98] As a concept created through modern, secular literature (poems, novels, etc.), Holy Rus' is clearly recognizable as a phenomenon of modernity despite all its past-oriented motifs and anti-modernist gestures. As such it offers alternative, 'mystical' frameworks for conceptualizing Russia's place in the modern world, but it also hinders scrutiny of the country's imperial past and present by reinforcing a persistent intellectual trend not to interrogate Russia's own colonial practices. Instead, it condemns Western universalism and imperialism while claiming Russia to be one of its victims.

[99] Yet, what at first glance promises an alternative, decolonial perspective of the world and the presence of the divine often ends up in reiterating some central notions of the European hegemonic discourse: In fact the modern, secular texts about Holy Rus' do not reject universalism and imperialism as such, but rather substitute them with particularly Russian, spiritual models of globality and modernity in which the link between the imperial territory and the transcendental dimension is often laced with colonialist attitudes and pronounced ideas of Russian superiority or self-exoticization. Thus the polemics against the universal Other of the secular world which Russian authors develop from the standpoint of the utopian community of Holy Rus' has a constant backlash on Russia's own 'others', i.e., minor religious, ethnic and cultural communities. A method for "envisaging what cannot be envisaged" (Hobsbawm 1990, 50), Holy Rus' also functions as obfuscating the obvious (i.e., Russia's cultural diversity and colonial aggression). For instance, the striving for holiness and the search for transcendental truth may lead to the sacralization of real geographical space, which in this particular case can only mean its poetic colonization and Christianization.

[100] While in the nineteenth century Holy Rus' mirrored some central dilemmas of Russian nation-building, from the demarcation of Russian national space within the boundaries of a multiethnic empire to the attempted nationalization (Russification) of the same empire, in the twenty-first century the idea of Holy Rus' obviously marks a strategy of constructing a unified national and religious community beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

[101] However, Holy Rus' not only redefines East and West, center and periphery, but also, as Rilke puts it, Russia's "above and beyond", dividing the world into two spheres: the accessible, habitual sphere of the Russian state and the distant, mysterious sphere of the divine. As a liminal space between Russia and the kingdom of God, Holy Rus provides special lenses for visualizing and positioning the Russian national body between these two realms; yet in liminality people comply with power not as autonomous beings but in deeply emotional and often irrational ways, since the sheer belonging to a sacred community 'interrupts' the routines of the profane world of measurement and rationality. For example, shifting the focus

from military conquests to the theme of martyrdom and victimhood, as it is the case in the stories about soldiers Foma Danilov and Evgenii Rodionov, encourages popular beliefs about the benign and peaceful nature of Russian policies of colonial expansion and domination, thus redefining those policies as a sort of a moral or religious quest—a struggle of the heart rather than that of the swords. In this context, martyrdom and victimhood may underpin peace and order or even provide consolation for the community of believers, but they can also sustain fierce antagonism towards other ethnic and religious communities.

[102] Unsurprisingly, in contemporary Russia the notion of Holy Rus' is often connected to right-wing conservative attitudes. The texts about Holy Rus' often lament the loss of social cohesion and seek a new sense of community within the utopian Orthodox brotherhood. While emphasizing the normative power of what is given by God, they implicitly reject the idea of a cultural construction of values. The utopia of pure community is precisely a place where religious extremism meets right-wing chauvinism.

[103] Thus Russia's decolonization would require a profound deconstruction of the concept of Holy Rus' in general and of its literary manifestations in particular. The latter should be stripped of their status of religious testimonies and poetic prophecies of transtemporal validity and should instead be analyzed in the context of Russia's imperial expansion and (ongoing) nation-building. In other words, the city of Kitezh, as a high ideal of Christian brotherhood and the righteous code of conduct, may only become visible when it is no longer overshadowed by the imperial grandeur of the Third Rome.

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A Spiritual *Perestroika*: Religion in the Late Soviet Parliaments, 1989–1991

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ABSTRACT The article discusses various meanings which were ascribed to religion in the parliamentary debates of the *perestroika* period, which included Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and other religious and lay deputies. Understood in a general sense, religion was supposed to become the foundation or an element of a new ideology and stimulate Soviet or post-Soviet transformations, either creating a new Soviet universalism or connecting the Soviet Union to the global universalism of human rights. The particularistic interpretations of religion viewed it as a marker of difference, dependent on or independent of ethnicity, and connected to collective rights. Despite the extensive contacts between the religious figures of different denominations, Orthodox Christianity enjoyed the most prominent presence in *perestroika* politics, which evoked criticisms of new power asymmetries in the transformation of the Soviet Union and contributed to the emergence of the Russian Federation as a new imperial, hierarchical polity rather than a decolonized one.

KEYWORDS Soviet Union, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, empire

Introduction

In 1989, following the start of a constitutional reform in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as part of *perestroika*,[1] religious figures joined the open-ended political discussion in the country's new parliamentary bodies and engaged in repositioning religion in the transforming Soviet state. Religion was never formally illegal in the USSR. With the exception of the violent anti-religious policies in the 1930s and early 1940s, the state and the ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) recognized and interacted with several major organized denominations, including Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, for most of the country's history. As Geraldine Fagan argued, it was this selective recognition [1]

1 In the context of this article, the term *perestroika* is understood in the broad sense and refers to the whole era of economic "reconstruction," the introduction of political openness (*glasnost*) and pluralism, and other reforms in the USSR.

by the Soviet state which laid the foundation for the set of four "traditional religions" with privileged legal status in contemporary Russia (Fagan 2013, 4–5).

[2] Religious leaders were also occasionally mentioned in the Soviet press, thanks to their participation in informal diplomacy and the state-sponsored peace propaganda (see, for instance, *Izvestiia*, December 7, 1960: 3; *Izvestiia*, October 1, 1980: 5). Despite limitations and state control, the representatives of the recognized denominations had numerous opportunities to exchange their ideas and consolidate their position on religion in general through different conferences and organizations since the 1950s, when Zagorsk hosted the First Conference of All Churches and Religious Organizations of the USSR for the Advocacy of Peace (1952) of 27 delegations from Soviet denominations and foreign representatives ("Konferentsiia vsekh tserkvei i religioznykh ob"edinenii v SSSR v zashchitu mira (khronika) [Conference of All Churches and Religious Organizations of the USSR for the Advocacy of Peace (Chronicle)]" 1952). Since the 1950s, Buddhism and Islam played an important role in the context of Soviet ties to many postcolonial states with which the USSR exchanged religious delegations. At the same time, the presence of religion in Soviet public space was miniscule, and religious activities remained under strict control of the state for most of the Soviet period (Bennigsen et al. 1989; Sablin 2019).

[3] The situation changed dramatically during *perestroika*, especially with the launch of the constitutional reform by the CPSU under Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev in 1988. Although at the Nineteenth CPSU Conference (June 28–July 1, 1988), which can be seen as the starting point of an open political discussion, religion was only briefly mentioned as a need of minorities, which the party vowed to satisfy (Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] 1988, 2:2:158), during the last four years of the USSR it became a buzzword in Soviet politics and law. Furthermore, it was the Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," adopted on October 1, 1990 (SSSR 1990), which can be considered one of the few concrete results of the reform-era USSR legislature (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1991d, 86).

[4] This article relies on the perspective of conceptual history, with its focus on active uses of language and conceptual innovation aimed at affecting policy and the assumption that "we create, (re)define, evaluate, (ab)use and reject concepts to construct much of our social reality and that human interpretations of the world and consequently the exact meanings of political concepts are unavoidably contested." The mass digitization of parliamentary records launched a parliamentary turn in conceptual history. This source material, which became much more accessible and can now be analyzed with digital tools, allows tracing how past political actors, rather than canonical thinkers or present-day social scientists, formulated and used concepts. Following Pasi Ihalainen, this article approaches parliamentary debates as nexuses of past political discourses, that is, as meeting places in which multi-sited political discourses intersected in the same time and space (Ihalainen 2021).

[5] In the context of *perestroika*, parliamentary debates became the site of transcultural contact not only in the ethno-national (Stefano 2020), but also the religious sense (Krech 2012). Representatives of different religious organizations and non-affiliated deputies debated the notion of religion and presented several understandings of and approaches to it in the diffused Soviet legislature, consisting of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies and the reformed USSR Supreme Soviet on the central level and the bodies of the union republics, such as the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic). The article uses digitized parliamentary debates in the three bodies to investigate qualitatively which

specific meanings were assigned to the word "religion" and "religious" by individual politicians and specific religious organizations during the last years of the Soviet Union (Ihalainen 2021; for a recent qualitative study with similar methodology, see Palonen 2021).

[6] Many deputies, but especially those who were affiliated with the officially recognized Orthodox Christian and Muslim organizations, defined religion in a general sense as spirituality which was supposed to replace the Communist ideology and become the driver of state and social transformations. In practical terms, a concert of denominations was supposed to represent religion in general. The idea of a concert of denominations corresponded to the institutionalized diversity of the multinational Soviet State and the multireligious representation in the parliaments. Religious figures also highlighted individualized religious freedom, which was supposed to connect the USSR with emerging post-authoritarian globality (Fukuyama 1989), but the human rights interpretation remained marginal. Even though there were atheist voices as well, the primacy of the major organized religions in the debates ensured that *perestroika* increasingly meant desecularization, which put its beginning even before the collapse of the USSR (Kormina, Panchenko, and Shtyrkov 2015).

[7] Religion was also seen by some participants of the debates as a primary or secondary marker of difference. As such, it was supposed to ensure a redefinition of collective political rights of religious or ethno-national groups, effectively decolonizing them; and, in some cases, also to reconnect these groups to the transboundary religious communities, those of Islam and Buddhism in the first place. In a situation of religious contact, the concrete meanings of religion were contested. Whereas the eventual conflict between established ("traditional") organizations and other religious communities (Di Puppo and Schmoller 2020) was not evident in *perestroika* debates, the asymmetry between the Orthodox Church and other organizations played a key role in the contestation.

[8] The much larger presence, compared to other organizations, of the Orthodox Church in the parliaments and the explicit claims of Orthodox figures to monopoly on religious ritual implicitly relied on the supposed share of the population professing Orthodox Christianity in the USSR as a whole and especially in the RSFSR, but the 1979 and 1989 general census did not collect information about religious affiliation. In practical terms, it relied on the pre-*perestroika* asymmetries: the Orthodox Church had the largest organizational structure in the USSR and acted as the de facto main religious organization in the post-1945 Soviet public sphere, especially in the Soviet peace movement (Fagan 2013). Desecularization hence did not necessarily mean decolonization, as the asymmetric presence of Orthodox Christianity engendered new hierarchies. This was especially true for the RSFSR, which was being reimagined along Russian nationalist lines with the symbolic participation of the Orthodox Church, and which Buddhist and other deputies opposed. Furthermore, there was no Buddhist representation in the USSR bodies, which resulted in the virtual absence of this denomination from the larger desecularizing Soviet space.

[9] The concepts of the imperial situation and imperial universalism prove especially helpful in discerning the meanings of religion. The idea of the imperial situation complicates the notion of empire, understood as the hierarchical governance[2] over and through difference, by suggesting that the composite society of the empire finds itself in constantly unstable balance.

2 The term empire was in fact explicitly articulated in the parliamentary debates, although in a political rather than analytical sense. Defining the RSFSR and decrying the power asymmetries in it and the USSR as whole, Murad Rasil'evich Zargishiev of Dagestan, for instance, asserted, "In my opinion, being a *de jure* republic, *de facto* it remains an empire, being, in turn, a part of another empire" (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:427).

Social categories in the imperial situation are not holistic entities, since social boundaries are "conditional, fluid, and situational," (Gerasimov et al. 2012, 19) and hence the difference itself is fluid and dynamic (Burbank and Cooper 2010; Gerasimov et al. 2009; 2012, 19–20). In this dynamic context, imperial universalism can be seen as an ideology of standing above difference and particularisms, which was used by elites or other groups in their attempts to stabilize and control the imperial situation (Crossley 2000, 37–38, 50–51).

[10] Both the crisis of Soviet universalism (Webb and Webb 1936; Wallensteen 1984) and the rise of national particularisms, which were produced by the nation-centric Soviet system itself (Suny 1993), can be seen as the main drivers of, first, *perestroika* and, then, the dissolution of the USSR. Religion in this respect can illustrate very well the inherited entanglements between universalisms and particularisms (Laclau 1992, 86). In the context of *perestroika*, religion was frequently understood as a new ideological foundation (or perhaps a new ideology). In the universalist sense it could appeal both to religion in general, a synonym for a moral code, and to concrete religions, the anticipated concert of the religions which were practiced in the USSR. These religions were supposed to become the source of the new ideology and provide solutions to moral and material problems. In these general and collective understandings, religion did not, however, necessarily point to a new universalism for the reformed Soviet or a new Russian empire. Religion was also used to inscribe the transformed (post-)Soviet space into the globalized Western-centric universalism of human rights, with its individualized attitude towards religion (Renteln 1989).

[11] In the context of the imperial situation, however, religion was also a potent marker of difference. As such, it denoted *inter alia* a separate self-sufficient category and inscribed its members into one of the global religious communities, appealing thereby to religious universalisms which spanned across the Soviet borders. Religion could also be a secondary marker for ethno-national categories, and as such it could be used in the construction of national particularisms (Agadjanian 2001). Just like in the case with the general understandings of religion, the claims to religious and national self-determination can also be seen as part of the anticipated universalism of human rights, albeit formulated not through individual but through the collective attitude towards religion (Dinstein 1976). These particularistic understandings of religion engendered power asymmetries (Brosius and Wenzlhuemer 2011), which translated into political tensions when the relations between concrete organizations came into question.

[12] Given the interconnectedness between universalistic and particularistic understandings of religion, the current article splits the empirical material into two sections without implying a strict differentiation between the different approaches to religion. Furthermore, individual deputies interpreted religion in multiple ways. The first section hence unites the overarching understandings which use the term religion in general. It focuses on debates of morality and briefly discusses some of the concrete meanings which were attached to religion in its relation to the state. The second section focuses on the interactions between different denominations, anticipated to be in concert, and deals with the tensions between the groups practicing different religions and between those who claimed to represent them. It also addresses the understandings of concrete religions as attributes of specific nations.

[13] The Soviet legislative bodies prove especially fruitful for exploring the multiple meanings of religion due to their open-ended debates and the diverse backgrounds of their members. The parliamentary debates can be understood as concrete manifestations of the imperial situation, since their participants articulated and perhaps even discovered different social categories in

the context of a direct religious contact. The article studies the verbatim reports of three institutions – the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, the USSR Supreme Soviet, and the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies.[3] The USSR Congress of People's Deputies was formally the supreme government body of the USSR in 1989–1991. Although only two thirds of the 2,250 deputies were elected, with the rest having been nominated by different organizations, while no parties other than the CPSU had access to the elections, it can be considered the country's first parliament. Despite the issues with representation, with deliberation (due to the short sessions), with its sovereignty within the system (due the continued presence of the CPSU), and with the responsibility of the cabinet to it, the USSR Congress of People's Deputies proved to be a deliberative institution of dissensus (Ihalainen, Ilie, and Palonen 2016) and a major forum where Soviet citizens had the opportunity to express their concerns freely and to the largest imaginable audience, thanks to the live broadcasts of the First Congress and the extensive coverage of the other four. The bicameral USSR Supreme Soviet, as the permanent parliament which was formed by the USSR Congress for developing and adopting legislation, was also a site of dissensus and deliberation (Lentini 1991).

The RSFSR was the only union republic which had its own Congress of People's Deputies. [14]
Due to the power struggle within the Soviet elite and to the especial complexity of the RSFSR, comparable to the complexity of the USSR at large (Hale 2005), the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies at times openly challenged the USSR Congress of People's Deputies and acted as an alternative parliament. Unlike its USSR counterpart, the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies of 1068 members was the first functioning legislature in Russian history which was elected through direct, universal, equal, and contested elections (Myagkov and Kiewiet 1996). The debates in the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies highlighted both the level of a union republic and an alternative approach to the open-ended transformation of the USSR, which could have followed a decolonizing logic and that of the formation of a new imperial regime in which Orthodox Christianity or the "traditional religions" would have been considered a cornerstone of empire-building (see Sablin 2018). Furthermore, the RSFSR Supreme Soviet passed its own Law "On Freedom of Religions" soon after its USSR counterpart, and the two documents had significant differences, with the RSFSR one exhibiting a more desecularizing approach (SSSR 1990; RSFSR 1990).

General Meanings: Religion in a New Ideology

Several generalized meanings and connotations of religion pointed at its general character [15]
and sought to position it in the ongoing reform of the USSR and its parts. Here, the issues of ideology and morality proved especially important, as well as the relations between religion and the state. In general terms, religion was not necessarily understood as a single whole and the idea of a "concert" of the different religions practiced in the USSR was also present in the debates. Although *perestroika* called for broad public participation in the reforms, it was inherently an etatist movement. The possible use of religion as an element of revised Soviet universalism or as the foundation for a new universalism fueled the discussion of the relations between religion and the state.

3 Using OCR (optical character recognition), the scanned records were made searchable. Then every located use of the word "religion" and its derivatives was analyzed. Further research could rely on the yet to be digitized records of the supreme soviets of the union and autonomous republics, including the RSFSR Supreme Soviet.

All three legislative bodies, the USSR and RSFSR Congresses of People's Deputies and the USSR Supreme Soviet, included active religious figures for the first time since the parliamentary institutions of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Russian Civil War. Their numbers were, however, not particularly high. In the USSR Congress, seven religious figures served as deputies, while in the RSFSR Congress there were five (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989a, 1:43; I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:86). Addressing the First USSR Congress of People's Deputies (May 25–June 9, 1989), Alexei Mikhailovich Ridiger (then Metropolitan Alexy and, since June 10, 1990, Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus' Alexy II) (Figure 1) noted that it was for the first time (in Soviet history) that a religious figure could speak from such an honorable rostrum (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989b, 2:55). The non-Orthodox religious figures at the USSR Congress included Mukhammad-Iusuf Mukhammad-Sodik (Chairman of the Presidium of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan) (Figure 2), Allakhshukiur Gummat ogly Pasha-Zade (Sheikh Ul-Islam, Chairman of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Transcaucasia), and Levon Abramovich Palchian (Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians Vazgen I). Additional religious figures were invited to participate in the debates on the Draft Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" at the USSR Supreme Soviet. They included Grigorii Ivanovich Komendant (Chairman of the All-Union Council of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists), Mikhail Petrovich Kulakov (Chairman of the All-Union Council of the Seventh-Day Adventists), and Adol'f Solomonovich Shaevich (Chief Rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue) (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:83). It is noteworthy that no Buddhist religious figures were represented in the two central Soviet parliaments. [16]

Religious organizations were not among those which could send their representatives to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, so the representation of religious leaders was situational. Metropolitan Alexy, for instance, was nominated without contestation by the Soviet Foundation for Charity and Health (Ivanchenko and Liubarev 2006, 21). Mukhammad-Sodik was elected in the Tashkent Region of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and introduced himself as the representative of the "multimillion Muslims" of the USSR (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989a, 1:63). [17]

Metropolitan Alexy positioned religion in *perestroika* in his speech at the First USSR Congress of People's Deputies, asserting that together with economy and democratization, *perestroika* included the "moral renewal" of the society. According to Alexy, Soviet history demonstrated that morality and social development had a "profound relationship" to one another and that "the most beautiful social ideas" could not "be realized by means of coercive methods without referring to human morality, conscience, reason, moral choice, and inner freedom." It was therefore "spiritual impoverishment" which was a major contributing factor to the difficult economic situation. Alexy maintained that morality and "moral principles" were supposed to "overcome human separation and spiritual alienation and thus unite us as brothers and sisters to build a happy future for ourselves and for our descendants." Alexy stressed the universalism of morality, suggesting that everyone should "build their relationships with others, with the society, with nature on the basis of a universal moral code."[4] He also declared that the (Russian Orthodox) Church and religious associations of other denominations were ready to contribute to moral renewal and anticipated the adoption of the [18]

4 All translation by the author unless indicated otherwise.

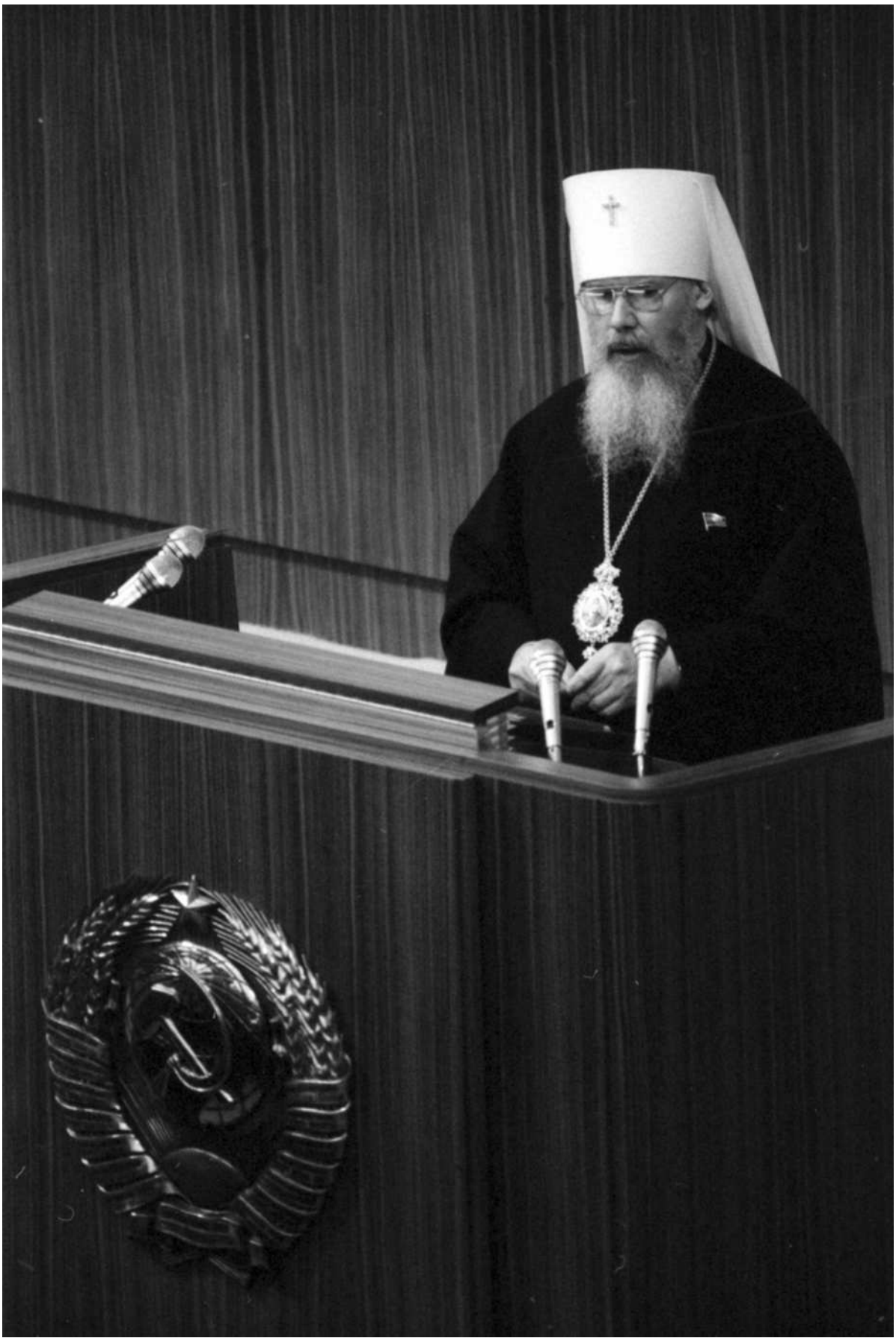

Figure 1 Deputy from the Soviet Foundation for Charity and Health, Metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod Alexy (Ridiger) during a speech at the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, Moscow, May 31, 1989. Photo by V. Zav'ialov. From the collection of the Russian State Film and Photo Archive (RGAKFD), Krasnogorsk, Item 0-383480.

Figure 2 Deputies of the Third (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR Mukhammad-Iusuf Mukhammad-Sodik, Chairman of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, and Mamatgazi Shergaziev, Chairman of the Collective Farm "Leningrad" of the Fergana Region of Uzbekistan, talking during a break between sessions. Moscow, March 13, 1990. From the collection of the RGAKFD, Krasnogorsk, Item 0-355521.

legislation on the freedom of conscience, which was needed for this (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989b, 2:56–57). At the Second USSR Congress of People's Deputies (December 12–24, 1989), Metropolitan Alexy connected the moral crisis to the rise of criminality, suggesting that religious knowledge would help prevent crime. He also pointed to the meeting between Gorbachev and the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church on April 29, 1988 as the starting point for the involvement of the Church in revival (II S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Second Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989, 3:557–58).

[19] Even though in both speeches he discussed religion in general, Alexy's references to the Russian Orthodox Church as the harbinger and the leader of the reforms can be interpreted as the construction, or rather the reaffirmation, of the hierarchy of concrete denominations in the USSR. The large-scale return of religion to Soviet public space can be connected to the massive celebration of the 1000th Anniversary (Millenium) of the Christianization of Rus' in June 1988, in which the Soviet government participated. Although the claim of the Russian Orthodox Church to the celebration of the event was challenged, in particular by Ukrainian commentators, it was staged as a Russian Orthodox (rather than a Ukrainian, Belarusian, or Catholic event) already during the planning. Over 4000 new parishes were established during and after the Millenium (Lupinin 2009, 32; Sorokowski 1987, 257). The Russian Orthodox Church had also mediated the talks between Pasha-zade and Vazgen I in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since 1988. Like most Soviet conferences on religion, it was the Russian Orthodox Church which hosted the Meeting of Representatives of Religions, Churches, and Religious Associations of the USSR on December 7, 1989, ahead of the Second USSR Congress of People's Deputies (Silant'ev 2010, 72).

[20] Other religious figures prepared speeches with a similar generalized understanding of religion for the First USSR Congress of People's Deputies, and although they had not been delivered (like the speeches of dozens of deputies), they were published as part of the proceedings. The Moldovan Priest Petr Dmitirevich Buburuz stressed that the revival of moral norms had to run parallel to the establishment of the rule of law. He specified that the social role of the Church (probably meaning both the Russian Orthodox Church and religion in general) had to be increased through religious education and upbringing, and that it could play an important role in charity, preservation of cultural heritage, environmental protection, and disarmament and peace campaigns (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989c, 4:172–75). The latter marked continuity with the pre-*perestroika* period, when religious figures were involved in the official Soviet peace campaigns.

[21] Mukhammad-Sodik celebrated the inclusion of believers into Soviet society through *perestroika*, the reopening of places of worship, and the participation of religious organizations in multiple spheres, including *inter alia* the promotion of the "friendship of the peoples." He summed up the general religious position: "We, religious figures, think that many undesirable phenomena in our society arise from the lack of spiritual and moral education. Therefore, the struggle for spiritual purification of our people is the most important task for all of us" (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:377–78, 380–81). Konstantin Vladimirovich Nechaev (Metropolitan Pitirim) raised similar issues, putting the morality of everyone at the center of all developments in the country and adding that the compatriots abroad were watching the country's spiritual revival (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:390–92). Pasha-Zade noted that both *perestroika* and the "moral purification" of society were irreversible, and

that religious norms would guarantee it (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:463–64).

As noted above, no Buddhist religious figures participated in the USSR Congress of People's Deputies. The Buryat Erdem Dashibalbyrovich Tsybikzhapov (Deputy Chairman of the Central Spiritual Board of Buddhists of the USSR), who was elected to the First RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies (May 16–June 22, 1990), explicated the universalist argument in favor of religion, arguing for political rights for believers, but remained cautious about its ability to resolve the multiple crises of the Soviet state and society. [22]

> Although some scientists and many other [people] claim that there is no soul, humans need spirituality. It separates us from the animal world. In addition to food and sleep, a person should have something that would elevate him above it. […] But I do not mean to say that religion can lead us out of the impasse we are in. Religion has a direction where it can provide some educational, cultural, moral help to the entire population, including young people. Religion has never made a human evil or dangerous to society. It simply brought up, created an atmosphere in which a human became a person (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:180–81). [23]

The discussion of morality was not exclusive to religious figures: Soviet dissidents had employed the notion of conscience before *perestroika* (Boobbyer 2005). Some lay deputies supported the moral approach to *perestroika* in the Soviet parliaments. Murad Rasil'evich Zargishiev of Dagestan also spoke of the "moral impasse" and the rights of believers, including educational and publishing activities, at the First RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies, and called for a special committee to be created in the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, which was eventually created, unlike in its USSR counterpart (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:427, 429). The Third RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies (March 28–April 5, 1991) nevertheless did not support the initiative of Valentina Viktorovna Lin'kova to issue an official statement of apology for the long-term violation of religious feelings to the "believers and clergymen of all religions operating in the Russian Federation" (III (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Third (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 5:94). During the debates of the Soviet law on religion in the USSR Supreme Soviet in May 1990, the Tajik filmmaker and politician Davlatnazar Khudonazarov maintained that the long-time struggle against religion ended in failure and that religion was a sphere that was not filled with anything else (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:253). The Kalmyk poet David Nikitich Kugul'tinov, who was a deputy of both the USSR Congress of People's Deputies and the USSR Supreme Soviet and claimed to represent Buddhists in the debates on the USSR religious law, stressed that the state needed conscience (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:255). [24]

Some lay deputies drew explicit connections between religion and ideology. One deputy noted in a non-delivered speech, prepared for the First USSR Congress of People's Deputies, that Marxism-Leninism was not omnipotent and that a dialogue with representatives of a religious worldview was needed (I S"ezd Narodnykh deputatov SSSR 1989e, 6:417). Another asserted at the Second USSR Congress of People's Deputies that the CPSU proved passive and applauded the constructive initiatives of the religious figures (II S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Second Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989, 3:563). [25]

Most of those who connected religion and ideology, however, used the former as an abstract concept denoting irrational beliefs and the institutions based on them. In this respect, religion was mainly used to criticize the CPSU. Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov, the famous dissident, openly claimed that the CPSU and the church were organizations of the very same type (II S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Second Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989, 3:185). The Georgian Tengiz Pavlovich Buachidze argued that any ideology could acquire features of a religion. He even called the presidency in the USSR, established by the Third USSR Congress of People's Deputies (March 12–15, 1990), a "secular" authority, implying its independence from the CPSU (III (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Third (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1990, 2:165). In her non-delivered speech for the First USSR Congress of People's Deputies, the Tajik poet Gulrukhsor Safieva explained that the project of a new, secular religion had failed because the human was forgotten in the process. At the same time, Safieva doubted that religion could be an alternative to ideology, since it was a spiritual category not suited for playing "a progressive role in the material world" (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989e, 6:161–62). These negative connotations attached to the very notion of religion were rooted in Soviet atheist discourse (Smolkin 2018). Iurii Ivanovich Borodin, a medical doctor, expressed a rare positive opinion of ideology in connection to religion. He compared Christianity and Communism as ideologies with the same roots and goals and urged the CPSU to revive Communist ideals (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:182). [26]

Some deputies suggested that religious expertise was indispensable for the resolution of the many violent conflicts which accompanied the crisis and collapse of the USSR, inviting religious figures to participate in the investigation of the Tbilisi Massacre—the violent dissolution of a demonstration on April 9, 1989 by the Soviet Army. Metropolitan Alexy was also included in the commission of the Congress of People's Deputies for investigating the Nazi–Soviet agreements of 1939 (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989a, 1:549; 1989b, 2:192, 876), but in this context probably as an influential native of Estonia rather than a religious figure. Nikolai Nikolaevich Gubenko, who was nominated as the USSR Minister of Culture, stressed that he was in contact with the (Russian Orthodox) Church and urged restoring spirituality during the discussion of his candidacy in the parliament (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1989c, 226). After his confirmation, he suggested inviting religious figures as experts for determining what materials were pornographic as part of the state initiative of boosting public morals (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1991b, 8:64, 70). At the same time, Mukhammad-Sodik's proposal to establish a permanent committee on religious affairs in the USSR Supreme Soviet was not adopted (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:379). Zargishiev's proposal of a similar committee in the RSFSR Supreme Soviet (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:429), by contrast, was incorporated into the RSFSR law on religion (RSFSR 1990). [27]

The RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies gave religion a more prominent role compared to the USSR institutions in general (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992b, 2:278). The debates on the RSFSR Declaration of State Sovereignty (ratified on June 12, 1990) included the issue of access of religious organizations to governance, and the final text guaranteed that all "RSFSR citizens, political parties, [28]

civil and religious organizations, mass movements, operating within the framework of the Constitution of the RSFSR," had "equal legal opportunities to participate in the management of state and public affairs" (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1993, 4:180, 184, 478). The debates in the USSR institutions before and after the RSFSR declaration dealt with the matter as well, but the suggestions to allow religious organizations to participate in elections and to sponsor political parties did not pass (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:243; 1990h, 3:111–12).

[29] Both the USSR and the RSFSR laws made religious organizations legal persons. Further discussions of adapting the Soviet state to the program of spiritual revival included the issues of military service, supervision, and education. Whereas the proposal to include alternatives to military service for religious reasons did not pass in the USSR legislature (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1989b, 195), it was introduced in the RSFSR law. In a similar manner, the USSR law on religion retained an official body for religious affairs under the Soviet cabinet, even though it was made consultative (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:253; 1990h, 3:91; SSSR 1990), whereas the RSFSR law abolished such a body in Russia (RSFSR 1990).

[30] The issue of education proved especially contentious. Mikhail Antonovich Denisenko (Metropolitan Filaret of Galicia and Kiev, Exarch of Ukraine, then the locum tenens Patriarch of Moscow and All-Rus', and later the Patriarch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church), who was an invited speaker at the debates on the Soviet law on religion, called for permitting religious education in public institutions (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990d, 15:205). Alexy voiced the same suggestion (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:93; 1990i, 3:169). Mukhammad-Sodik was even more direct, claiming that his voters of different faiths demanded that religion was taught in schools (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:252).

[31] Among the opponents against the provision in the initial draft that school buildings could be provided for teaching religion, let alone against religious education in public schools, were the teacher Igor' Mikhailovich Bogdanov, the physicist Sergei Mikhailovich Riabchenko, the cosmonaut Svetlana Evgen'evna Savitskaia, and other deputies. The provision was ultimately excluded (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:119–21; 1990i, 3:173, 181). The proposals to allow history of religion in public schools for education in moral values also did not pass (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990d, 15:209; 1990c, 15:254; 1990h, 3:112, 119).

[32] The supporters of returning religion to school in the RSFSR bodies (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992b, 2:283; II (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Second (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:221) succeeded only partially. The amendments to the RSFSR Constitution kept state education secular, with Dmitrii Egorovich Stepanov even maintaining that he still considered religion to be "opium for the people," but the RSFSR law on religion allowed teaching religion from academic perspectives and explicitly allowed elective courses in religion at all educational institutions, which made the separation flexible (II (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Second (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992b, 5:187–92; 1992c, 6:248; RSFSR 1990).

[33] Despite the official Soviet state's celebrations of its own success in atheist policies (Smolkin 2018, 117–18, 180), the majority of those who spoke on religion in non-neutral terms in the late Soviet parliaments did so favorably, while the RSFSR parliamentary bodies took steps

towards desecularization. Direct opposition to religion was rare. Riabchenko, for instance, urged not to make religion equal to morality and rejected the former's monopoly on the latter (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990i, 3:171). The discussions also reflected in the press. Stanislav Nesterovich Pastukhov, a *Pravda* commentator, noted that religious education in public schools would lead to chaos in the context of religious diversity and, quoting Riabchenko, reminded his readers of religious conflicts and violence (*Pravda*, October 7, 1990: 2).

[34] The relations between religion and atheism nevertheless proved contested. Vladimir Aleksandrovich Voblikov called for protecting the rights of atheists in the USSR law on religion (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990d, 15:207). Riabchenko urged protecting the scientific worldview in the context of banning state-sponsored propaganda of atheism in the new law, which resulted in clarifications on the status of science and guarantees for it (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:91, 106–10). The Chechen Sazhi Zaindinovna Umalatova, who called herself a Muslim, raised the issue of religious upbringing in families, but her proposal to protect children from imposed religion did not pass. Neither did her proposal to ban religious rituals in all official activities (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:103–6).

Particularistic Meanings: Religion as a Marker of Difference

[35] The ideas of a multireligious unity experienced similar challenges as those of a multiethnic one. Religion in concrete terms was frequently understood as a secondary marker of ethnicity or nationality, which projected interethnic tensions and conflicts onto religious interactions. Furthermore, some were critical of the predominance of Orthodox Christianity and new asymmetries. Others viewed their religions as spanning the borders of the USSR or the RSFSR, thereby supporting respective religious universalisms.

[36] The position of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was often seen as the main speaker for religion, was ambivalent. Vladimir Mikhailovich Gundiaev (Archbishop, since 2009 Patriarch of Moscow and All-Rus' Kirill), who addressed the Second RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies (November 27–December 15, 1990) on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church as an invited speaker, declared that the (Russian Orthodox) Church was neutral in politics. According to Kirill, it rejected the roles of leader and political alternative due to its eternal objectives. At the same time, he called for restitution of church property as an act of "of popular repentance" (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:276–77, 279).

[37] The Fifth RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies (July 10–17, October 28–November 2, 1991), which during its first period of convocation swore Boris Nikolaevich El'tsin in as the popularly elected Russian President, invited Alexy II, then already the Patriarch. Alexy II addressed the Congress of People's Deputies and El'tsin from Christian positions, claiming that the President was responsible not only before the people but also before God, and expressed his conviction that the President would foster the restitutions to the Church and other religious organizations. Even though Alexy II read an address from the Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, and Baptist), Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish religious figures who were present at the assembly, he blessed El'tsin with the sign of the cross when passing the text to him (Congress of People's Deputies RSFSR V, 1: 6–8). This moment was televised and photographed. The address itself relied on a general understanding of religion.

> Dear Boris Nikolaevich! By the election of the people and God's will you are awarded the highest political authority in Russia. Russia is not just a country, it is a continent inhabited by people of different nationalities, different convictions and faiths. We all wish a peaceful and favorable future for it, and we all pray for you and hope that you will serve the good of our Motherland, its speedy recovery from the painful wounds that were inflicted on it in the previous years of struggle with the spiritual foundations of human life. … The ideals of equality, freedom, and spiritual revival that you promised in the days leading up to the elections will hopefully be the constant pointers for you in all the years of your work as Russian President (II (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Second (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:8) [38]

Given the asymmetries in favor of Orthodox Christianity on the USSR and RSFSR levels, the question of which concrete institutions were understood as religions came up frequently during the debates. The advocates of the general approach supported the idea of a concert of religions, which was connected to both the ideas of patriotism and the Soviet concept of a multiethnic people. In an undelivered speech, Pasha-Zade called the deputies the children of one God and one motherland and urged for unity of the "representatives of different peoples" and "of different convictions and beliefs" for the sake of the common goal. Pasha-Zade then continued that it was the duty of the heads of all denominations to work together for "bridging the gaps in the society," so that religion could not be used to aggravate national tensions (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:461–63). In another undelivered speech, Mukhammad-Sodik stressed that he was backed by voters of diverse nationalities and religions. He then urged Vazgen I and Pasha-Zade to do everything in their powers to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:377–80). The idea that the multiple religions in concert would strengthen the state was voiced both at the USSR and the RSFSR institution. Some deputies stressed the need for a multireligious revival in their home republics or regions (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:428; Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990b, 10:95–96; 1990h, 3:112). [39]

The supporters of the concert approach made religion and nationality part of the same diversity conglomerate, in which religion was often a derivative category. Tsybikzhapov, for instance, claimed that religion was "the spiritual and cultural heritage that all peoples have had, the faith that has been traditionally passed down from the older generation to the newer generation, must be restored." It was hence in the same realm of tradition as were language, music, and "national dress" (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:180)—the markers of difference which were at the core of the Soviet understanding of nationality, especially during the later decades. Zargishiev also viewed religious and national cultures as deeply interconnected (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:428). [40]

Such a view was common for the those claiming to represent the Russian nation as well. Viktor Vladimirovich Aksiuchits, a Christian dissident, deemed the spiritual revival "religious-national" and argued for traditional values against ideology or revolution (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992b, 3:425, 427). Bela Anatol'evna Denisenko, a medical doctor, spoke of the [41]

Russian "ethnos" and claimed that the interest to religion was part of the Russian national resistance to Bolshevism (III (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Third (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992b, 2:121). There were voices which cautioned against equating religion with nationality and making the latter the only organizing principle. Fedor Vladimirovich Tsann-kai-si, for instance, opposed ethno-national essentialism and claimed that the Russian federation had to be rebuilt on multiple principles, including territoriality and religion, rather than just nationality (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992b, 3:166–67). Most speakers, however, remained in the realm of Soviet discourse and, when speaking about concrete religions, viewed them as part of particularistic ethno-national communities.

[42] The attempts to assert and contest religious asymmetries featured prominently in the discussions. Buburuz, for instance, proposed making Easter and Christmas public holidays (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989f, 3:175). Pitirim stressed in an undelivered speech that the 1988 meeting between Gorbachev and the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, marking the 1000th anniversary of Christianity in Russia, was a testimony of the Church's historical role (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:392). After Aleksandr Grigor'evich Zhuravlev used "Russia" as the historic name of the USSR and asked Pitirim to bless the Congress of People's Deputies ahead of Christmas, however, the Kazakh composer Erkegali Rakhmadievich Rakhmadiev rebuked such "imperial chauvinism" and asked if this meant that Pitirim was to convert Muslims and Buddhists to Christianity (IV S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Fourth Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1991, 2:164, 188–89).

[43] The presence of different denominations in parliament and the public sphere was unequal. Tsybikzhapov noted that he was the only non-Christian religious figure in the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:180). Kugul'tinov claimed that the USSR Supreme Soviet would have felt "uncomfortable" if a representative of the Buddhists had not participated in the debates on the USSR law (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:254). Some deputies noted the presence of Orthodox priests on TV as a positive development but called for the representation of other religions as well (II (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Second (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992d, 4:97). The issue of inequality was not necessarily centered on Orthodox Christianity. Other established organizations claimed their own centralisms. Mukhammad-Sodik, for instance, opposed the idea of registering small religious organizations, pointing out the dangers of their independence and uncontrolled interpretations of religion (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990c, 15:253).

[44] Riabchenko's abovementioned argument against religious education in public school buildings revolved around the idea that different groups would have unequal access to them. The Adventist Kulakov, who was invited to the debates on the Soviet law on religion, voiced a similar concern, but instead proposed allowing full school education in religious institutions (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:92, 98). The very discussion of the access of religious organizations to public schools involved inequality. Bozorali Solikhovich Safarov of Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), for instance, claimed that for Muslims it would make no sense, as their religion could not be taught in rooms with portraits. The introduction of such norms would ultimately mean unequal treatment of five (predomi-

nantly Muslim) union republics. He even exclaimed, "It's not just one faith here!" (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990i, 3:172). Similar concerns of possible unequal access were voiced against the introduction of religious ceremony to the military (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990i, 3:160–61).

[45] In order to reassert their denominations in the public political space of the transforming USSR, the leaders of Muslim and Buddhist organizations followed a similar strategy to that of the Russian Orthodox Church. Following the 1988 celebration of the 1000th anniversary of Christianity in Russia, the Tatar and Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) hosted the festivities honoring the 1100th anniversary of the conversion of Volga Bulgaria to Islam in 1989, which made its history on the Russian territory older than that of Christianity. During the celebrations, the position of Islam in the USSR was further reinforced through its inscription into the global religious universalism through the invitation of high-ranking guests.

[46] The idea of a global Muslim community was also prominent for some deputies. In an undelivered speech, Mukhammad-Sodik, for instance, applauded the authorities of the Uzbek SSR for reopening mosques and returning Osman's Quran to the believers. He then raised the issues of the hajj restrictions and the lack of religious literature (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989d, 5:378–79). Magomed Bagandalievich Bagandaliev of Dagestan passed an appeal of a group of Muslims to the RSFSR Congress of People's Deputies, in which they also demanded lifting the restrictions on travelling for hajj (I S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989f, 3:58–59). Nikolai Nikolaevich Engver of Udmurtia raised the issue of more Quran copies requested by his Muslim voters, which could possibly be resolved with the assistance of Saudi Arabia (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990e, 3:161). Some connected the idea of global religious unity to international relations. Abdul-Rakhman Khalil ogly Vezirov of Azerbaijan lamented the destruction of Muslim sacred sites in the Gulf War (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1991a, 2:73).

[47] The 1989 celebrations also commemorated the 200th anniversary of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the European Part of the USSR and Siberia, which was thus traced to the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, which practically meant the official recognition of Islam as one of the religions of the Russian Empire (Werth 2014). A similar anniversary, the 250th anniversary of the official recognition of Buddhism in Russia, was celebrated in the Buryat ASSR in 1991, with the Fourteenth Dalai Lama playing a prominent role at the festivities (Kovrov 1991). The idea of Buddhist transboundary unity was reinforced by Tsybikzhapov in the parliament. He stressed that Buddhism was a culture of the Orient, that Russia was not only a European but also an Asian country, and criticized the lack of diversity in the solemn swearing of the President, meaning Alexy II's actions (II (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov RSFSR [Second (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR] 1992a, 1:278–79).

[48] The violent context of the Soviet transformations was especially challenging for the concert of religions as the new universalism or a part of one. The many interethnic conflicts, some of which became extremely violent, had a religious dimension. A group of Soviet deputies that went to the Fergana Region, for instance, reported to the parliament that the mobilization against the Meskhetian Turks and the Russians was carried out by pro-Islamic organizations (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1989a, 50–52). The tensions between the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, which had been discussed in religious terms, were

not confined to Nagorno-Karabakh itself. The Nagorno-Karabakh deputy Genrikh Andreevich Pogosian, for instance, pointed to the loss of Armenian Christian churches in the Nakhchivan ASSR of the Azerbaijani SSR as an example of religious institutions of one confession being mismanaged by the representatives of another one (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1989d, 3:91). Alexy spoke of the events in Western Ukraine and accused the supporters of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, namely the Ukrainian national organizations, of inciting the takeover of the churches of the Moscow Patriarchate and the supposed forced conversions (II S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Second Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1989, 3:559–61). Mikhail Konstantinovich Pashaly appealed to Alexy, then already the Patriarch, for action against the attempts to subordinate the Church in Moldovan SSR to Romania on behalf of his Gagauz and Bulgarian voters (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:100). Some deputies evoked these conflicts when calling for strengthening the equality of all religions (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990h, 3:92).

[49] The issues of the (then still potential) dissolution of the USSR and RSFSR also had a religious dimension. En Un Kim discussed the future of Osman's Quran, a relic for all Soviet Muslims, in case Uzbekistan left the union, and suggested keeping it in the USSR (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990g, 3:215). Ianis Ianovich Peters of Latvia argued that the independence of the Baltic states required guarantees for minorities, including their right to exercise their own religion (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990f, 3:271). Vasilii Ivanovich Belov, a Russian nationalist writer, feared the possible dissolution of Russia and its turning into a territory between "the shared European home" and the "Muslim region," urging the RSFSR Supreme Soviet to prevent it (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1990a, 1:244). After the departure of multiple republics from the new union talks, Munavarkhon Zakriiaevich Zokirov of Uzbekistan attempted to brush aside such fears of asymmetry in the new union, in which six out of nine anticipated republics would be "Muslim," claiming that these republics in fact proved loyal to the Soviet cause (Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR [Supreme Soviet of the USSR] 1991c, 19:284).

[50] The discussion of Vladimir Il'ich Lenin's possible burial can be seen as a manifestation of the amplified religious and nationalist particularisms. Anatolii Aleksandrovich Sobchak suggested burying Lenin, the symbol of Soviet internationalism and atheism, in accordance with the national and religious traditions of the (Russian) people just before Gorbachev closed the last Fifth USSR Congress of People's Deputies (September 2–5, 1991). The congress itself dealt with the aftermath of the attempted coup by the Communist hardliners and marked the practical end of the USSR reform, paving the way for its dissolution on December 26, 1991 (V (vneocherednoi) S"ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR [Fifth (Extraordinary) Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR] 1991, 19).

Conclusion

[51] There was no consensus on what religion meant in the parliamentary debates of *perestroika*. During the early phase of the debates, religion as an abstract category was seen as a key foundation for a spiritual revival and for *perestroika*'s ultimate success. The particularistic understandings of religion, which were also present from the very beginning, proved more prominent, however, and the question which religion was to become the foundation of *perestroika* shifted to the foreground. The latter question connected religion to the multiple in-

terethnic conflicts across the USSR and launched the discussions of new imperial hierarchies, which in the RSFSR could mean the domination of the Russian Orthodox Church and selected recognition of other religions.

[52] The representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church attempted to claim the whole religious space of the USSR and, then, of the RSFSR. By making a particularistic (Orthodox Christian) understanding of religion the foundation of a new Russian ideology, they contributed to the homogeneous picture of Russian national history and culture, concealing if not denying the presence of the religious "other" (see the Introduction to this special issue). The attempts to turn Orthodox Christian particularism into a new Russian imperial universalism were reminiscent of the attempts of Russian nationalists to claim a similar space in the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which contributed in the imperial revolution (Gerasimov 2017).

[53] The state-centered approach to religion, which can be traced to *perestroika*'s overall etatism, made religion an important part of nation-building, which in the case of Russia connected Russian nationalism to Orthodox Christianity and, despite the lip service to diversity, was reflected in the explicitly Christian swearing-in of the first Russian President. The location of religion in the past also contributed to stronger particularisms as religion became an element of primordial nationalism with its idea of cultural difference rather than cultural affinity. Finally, both the etatism and the primordialism contributed to the attempted centralization of Russia's traditional religions, four of which finally made it into public education and the army (Sablin 2018).

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A Place of One's Own: Pilgrimage and the Reinterpretation of Culture in Russia's Ural Region

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ABSTRACT This article engages with the negotiation of Russian history and culture, focussing on the concept of tradition. Instead of contesting the concept of tradition as it is used by the state authorities, members of the Muslim minority in Russia tend to indicate tradition to claim their own culture, distinct from a new national culture stressing Orthodox Christianity and Slavic origins. By undertaking a pilgrimage to sacred sites in the south of Perm Krai, Muslim believers from the Russian Urals reconnect with the land and help to restore a lived Muslim culture that has suffered from Soviet repression and which is mostly ignored by the more recent nation-building strategies.

KEYWORDS Islam, Russian Orthodox Church, local pilgrimage, lived religion, tradition, heritage, Russian Urals

Introduction

In the largest country on the planet, matters of identity can be nothing else but complicated. [1] A homogenous national identity may be an ideal of the modern imagination that rarely conforms to the reality on the ground. On the following pages, this contrast and its consequences are critically considered. For members of the ethnic minorities in Russia, who are conscious of their history and culture, the situation has become increasingly difficult in the more recent past. Since the reform of the language policy for the ethnic republics, native language education in school has been reduced to a minimum and is no longer obligatory.[1] This is just one

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See Yusupova (2022) for further information about the language policy change and reactions to it by ethnic minority activists.

of the more glaring examples of a perception of culture and history that stresses the presence of Russian components while denying—or at least neglecting—that of others. A neglect of this kind also extends to the religious realm. In conditions where Muslims are often portrayed as outsiders, even though it was Russia that in the sixteenth century began expanding into territories where Muslim populations had formed complex societies, practising Muslims have to make careful choices about how to preserve their traditions and how to reconnect with the land.[2] Thus, this article enquires into the negotiation of culture in its relation to space and identity.

[2] A number of questions inform the paragraphs of this text: Which representations of culture (national, religious, ethnic) can be observed in contemporary Russia? Who has the right to define national culture? And what might an ethnic or religious minority response to this definition be? In the Ural region of Russia, where the European continent ends and the Asian one begins, some Muslims cultivate notions of homeland and heritage that contrast with other, more dominant accounts of Russian history and culture. These notions become apparent in the context of a local Muslim pilgrimage, and I think that they may be understood as a minority claim by the local inhabitants to their own ethnic or religious culture. For the negotiation of religious culture specifically, the concept of tradition turns out to be relevant in the Russian environment. In public and private discourses and conversations, it assumes a legitimising function. A "traditional" religion, according to this logic, is a faith whose history can be traced over centuries and which thus *belongs* to the Russian space. Curiously, members of the Muslim minority do not simply ignore this discourse and consequently challenge the rules of the game, but they frequently uphold the narrative about Russia's "traditional" religions. At the same time, "tradition" also serves to undermine the prominent position of the Russian Orthodox Church and the formative effect of Orthodox Christianity on Russian culture by transforming Russian culture from within.

[3] In the text at hand, we are not merely concerned with contrasting *positions* in regard to national culture. A term such as 'negotiation' may be interpreted in a discursive sense, but it can also take a more active and engaged form. The local Muslim pilgrimage discussed below, I want to suggest, moreover has a transformative effect on the immediate space. It helps to manifest a lived Muslim culture threatened by both a more pervasive religious denomination and secular principles. With some of its basic assumptions about the world around us differing radically from mainstream convictions, the embrace and validation of this lived Muslim culture may well be considered an instance of world-making. The land undergoes change, as a reality is being established that allows for miracles and supernatural intervention.

[4] Within Russia and the former Soviet space, local Muslim pilgrimage may have profited from the Soviet targeting of institutional religion, which in some people created a distrust towards official clergy and helped to transfer religious practice from the mosque to specific places of veneration (Wanner 2020; Kormina 2010, 270; Sartori 2019). But irrespective of the Soviet experience, pilgrimage to sacred places is an aspect of Muslim religious expression with a considerable history all across Europe, Asia, and Africa. As in the case of Orthodox Christian pilgrimage, we find that local Muslim pilgrimage can blend with tourism and other forms of mobility (Kormina 2010; Wanner 2020, 89). Over the previous years and decades, a most diverse landscape of sacred sites has developed in the Ural and Volga regions of Russia: the archaeological complex of Bolghar, located south of Kazan on the Volga river in the Republic

2 For the return of religion as a major component of a people's identity in other formerly Soviet states (and other contexts), see Tsyrempilov, Bigozin, Zhumabayev (2022) and Aitpaeva (2016).

of Tatarstan, but also the town of Troitsk in the Chelyabinsk region, near the border with Kazakhstan, where the grave of sheikh Zaynulla Rasulev can be found, have emerged as major Islamic pilgrimage destinations. Travel agencies catering to a Muslim clientele have added these places to their programmes, and busloads of tourists arrive throughout the year from all parts of Russia and even abroad. Other places, such as the sacred hills Narystau and Toratau from the vicinity of Sterlitamak in the Republic of Bashkortostan, have achieved an intermediate status. Whereas Narystau invites visitors once a year to a summer festival, Toratau provides "Geopark Toratau," a major eco-touristic project, with its name. At these and other places, Muslim pilgrims engage in prayer and further religious practices. The chance to be supplied with *baraka*, an auspicious force of spiritual origins, constitutes a major incentive to visit, but differently from Orthodox Christian contexts, where places and things would be "animated with prayer," energy does not derive from human activity here but from the presence of a saint or the closeness to God (Wanner 2020, 80–81; Kormina 2010, 275–277).

[5] As we have seen above, people go on Muslim pilgrimages to sacred places for a number of different reasons. To this one would have to add that obviously not all pilgrims are religious to the same degree. Since the Soviet state helped to forge ethno-civic identities among groups who would otherwise have identified primarily as Muslim, one can nowadays observe a curious overlap of ethnic and religious identities (Benussi 2021, 315–16). "Ethnic Muslims", who may conceive of their religious belonging as something resembling a hereditary trait, may in comparison with others who strictly adhere to the Islamic rules and regulations only qualify as minimally religious. And it is often these who respond positively to local pilgrimage and similar, less orthodox practices. For both religiously and secularly-minded people, the places they visit may also easily be integrated into larger narratives of community and inheritance. Golden and sometimes mythic pasts are evoked in the framework of Tatar or Bashkir nationalist projects just as much as they are meant to inspire the imagination of travellers who have purchased a round trip. Yet from a religious point of view, pilgrimage places do not necessarily benefit from all too much attention. Being rediscovered by the state can have significant consequences for places left alone for extended periods of time to develop their own social and religious dynamics. When employed for purposes of nation-building, a process of museumification may set in that tends to appeal to secular visitors but also deprives those places of their religious spirit (Benussi 2021, 323–25).

[6] I have been conducting anthropological research of Muslim belief and practice in the famously multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ural region of Russia for seven years. The material for this paper was gathered in Perm Krai, which is home to inhabitants of Slavic, Finno-Ugric, as well as Turkic descent; and while Komi and Komi-Permyak villages are to be found in the north, place names such as Kungur, Orda, Suksun, and Ashap bear testimony to the Turkic-Muslim history of the south. On two occasions, I spent an extended period of time in Barda, a rural location with an ethnic composition that is almost entirely Tatar / Bashkir and whose inhabitants communicate in the Tatar language in the street.[3] With almost 9,000 inhabitants, Barda is categorised as a *selo* and constitutes the administrative centre of the Barda district. In 2021, the census registered a population of more than 24,000 people in the Barda district, of which 55% are Bashkirs, 36% Tatars, and 7,5% Russians. In economic terms, people engage mostly in agricultural work. Barda *selo* is located 125 kilometres in direct distance from the city of Perm, 143 kilometres from Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurt Republic, and 244 kilometres from Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan. It is also widely regarded

3 Chernyh et al. (2009) provide rich ethnographic detail about Barda.

Figure 1 The valley of Barda in the early morning hours. Photo: Jesko Schmoller, 2016.

as the Muslim centre of Perm Krai, and Tatar cultural values help to configure social relations among family members, friends, acquaintances, and neighbours. It is important to mention, however, that not all Muslims share the same outlook in Russia, and those that I was in contact with are mostly of the vernacular kind. Other Muslims may not care so much about Tatar culture and history and tend to be less accepting of the Russian discourse about "traditional" religions.

Developments in the Religious Sphere

To be better able to understand the situation of Islam and its adherents in Russia, we must first gain an insight into the developments that took place in the religious sphere since the breakup of the Soviet Union with its state-proclaimed atheist ideology. It turns out that the course of the relationship between the state and the Muslim community is closely linked to [7]

the role that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has assumed over the previous decades. Who would have predicted that in a once staunchly anti-religious environment, an institution such as the ROC could experience an incredibly successful comeback, making it again the predominant religious actor within Russia (Quenoy 2018, 159)? According to scholar of religion and international relations Irina du Quenoy (2018, 160–61), one can differentiate four distinct periods of the state's approach towards religion between 1990 and 2016: (1) the period of unrestricted exercise of religion from 1990 to 1997; (2) the period of managed religious pluralism from 1997 to 2008; (3) the "Orthodox turn" under Dmitry Medvedev from 2008 to 2011; and (4) the securitisation of religion under a returning president Putin from 2012 to 2016. Early on, by 1996, the political elite came to see Orthodox Christianity, but also Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, as "traditional" for Russia. Although not explicitly declared, the predominant position of the ROC was made apparent by inviting representatives of all "traditional" religions to the second presidential inauguration of Boris Yeltsin that year, but only asking the patriarch of the ROC to give a congratulatory speech. In the same indirect fashion, the Muslim community would be turned into the unspecified "other" of the ROC over the following years, a process that might also be explained by demographic circumstances (Quenoy 2018, 167). If currently at least 15 million people, or 11% of the overall population, can be considered Muslim, this number is expected to rise significantly, so that by 2050 a minimum of 33% of Russians are estimated to be of Muslim heritage (Laruelle 2016). Such a development would significantly change the appearance of Russian society and culture, making it even more necessary, in the eyes of certain ideologues, to firmly establish a Russian national culture stressing the Slavic and Orthodox Christian heritage. The 1997 amendments to the originally Soviet Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations were meant to restrict the expansion of non-"traditional" religious movements in Russia and helped to formalise the idea of Russia's four major "traditional" religions (Quenoy 2018, 163–65; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2019, 11). Since its reform, the law emphasises the significant role of the ROC throughout Russian history. Early on in the new millennium, public officials also began to invoke, on suitable occasions, the narrative of Russia as a bridge connecting civilisations and of the peaceful coexistence of Orthodox Christianity with the other main religions, first and foremost Islam. A real shift in policy towards religion occurred after Medvedev assumed the presidential office in 2008, aiming for a more solid position of the ROC in Russian society (Quenoy 2018, 168–70). Finally, the state gave in to three demands the Moscow Patriarchate had made repeatedly over the course of more than fifteen years: the inclusion of Orthodox religious instruction in public schools, the assignment of chaplains to military units in the army, and the return of religious property confiscated during the Russian Revolution of 1917.[4] After several indications in this direction, the ROC started to be treated as the actual, if not officially acknowledged, state church of the Russian Federation.

The "altar and throne alliance"—a term used by Katarzyna Chawryło (2015)—has resulted in an astonishing elevation of the ROC to a position of power and influence.[5] Subsequently, one may ask the following: If Orthodox Christianity is now becoming a central element of [8]

4 For an anthropological case study of religious education at the school level from central Russia, see Köllner (2019). One should mention that in practice, parents may choose Orthodox religious instruction to be replaced by secular ethics. Similarly, in Muslim-majority regions the same subject can be devoted to only Islam.

5 The term alliance already suggests, though, that when taking a closer look, relations between the state and the church are more complicated than at first sight. One should also be aware that the expression "altar and throne alliance" has been used to describe conditions during the Bourbon Restoration in nineteenth-century France and other cases before being applied to the current situation in Russia.

national culture in Russia, where does that leave Islam? Here, we return to the problem of "othering" Muslims already mentioned above. In Russia, religion tends to be closely associated with ethnic identity and culture, which could further the divide between the Russian Orthodox majority and the Muslim minority (Sauvé 2017, 16; Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 62; Quenoy 2018, 177). In a potentially conflictual situation, people of darker complexion may experience trouble for being associated with Islam, but they may also feel rejected when noticing that little efforts are made to include ethnic minority culture and history in the image of the nation, causing them to withdraw from the dialogue about national culture or shifting their loyalties elsewhere.[6] According to a survey from the early 2000s, approximately one-third of the Russian population did not regard Muslims in a favourable way (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 52). Another, more recent, survey from 2012 indicated that Islam was considered the religion most "foreign" to Russia, which is ironic when regarding both Russian history and the official status of Islam in the country. On one occasion, I was confronted in a scholarly environment with the opinion that the Mongol hordes had brought Islam to Russia, which can only be upheld as an argument if one were to consider all territories that Russian forces captured and incorporated over the subsequent centuries to be inherently Russian from the beginning.[7] More generally, scholars have pointed to the existence of a dual narrative about Islam in Russia, where state officials express positive opinions about "traditional" Islam while condemning the Salafi interpretation of the faith (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 52). These simplified representations of exceedingly complex circumstances tend to reproduce binary oppositions of "traditional" and "modern," "Russian" and "foreign," "moderate" and "radical," "peaceful" and "violent," "good" and "bad" Islam.[8] Since it is in fact more difficult to differentiate between interpretations of Islam than suggested by the image of a "dual narrative," I would argue that Islam as a whole and not only its radical variant faces stigmatisation. The Russian media are partly responsible for such tendencies and have strongly contributed to the reinforcement of negative sentiments towards working migration from Central Asia and Azerbaijan (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 52). Another example for the stigmatisation of Islam, but also for a certain duality in the relationship between official declarations about Islam on the one hand and their implementation on the other, would be the very limited number of functioning mosques in the Russian capital. Although Moscow is assumed to be home to about two million Muslims, permanent residents as well as temporary migrants, only four official mosques serve their spiritual needs (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 59; Lozinskaâ 2019). It may constitute a challenge to identify a better case that would illustrate the widespread concern with an Islamisation of Russian society.

Before moving on, let me still reflect briefly upon the last period of the state approach towards religion, which, according to du Quenoy (2018, 171–74), has been characterised by the securitisation of religion and especially Islam. Since 2012, the political elites in Russia have agreed upon two major threats for the country's "spiritual sphere:" an outlook on life that is devoid of spirituality and allegedly prevalent in the West as well as Islamic radicalism. Regarding the latter phenomenon, securitisation denotes the political measures taken to contain the threat emanating from it, but it also refers to the transformation of the public [9]

6 This is not to say that either the church or the state would be aiming for the conversion of Muslims to Orthodox Christianity. According to the logic of religious nationalism, each ethnic group in Russia stands in a certain faith tradition and nothing needs to be changed about that situation.

7 This also brings to mind interpretations in certain Christian circles of medieval Europe, where territories that had seen even rather superficial Christian missionary activity were being claimed for the church.

8 Much has been written about "traditional" Islam in Russia. See, for instance, Aitamurto (2019), Di Puppo (2019) or Müller (2019).

perception of this phenomenon because of the same measures (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 47). As Verkhovsky (2018, 23–25) points out, the efforts of the state to prevent the destabilisation of the "ethno-confessional balance of the population" are informed by the well-established idea that stability and tradition are threatened from the outside instead of internal developments of a social or political nature. He also mentions that few state representatives seriously attempt to make sense of the different trends within Islam but are content with categorising them as either "traditional" or "radical." The securitisation of Islam is most pronounced and visible in the legal realm, where both organisations and individuals are being targeted (Laruelle and Yudina 2018, 48). Together with France, Russia boasts the highest number of legal state actions against religious groups in all of Europe. For 2014 and 2015, more than 200 such cases were registered. Groups that experienced trouble (although not all of them would qualify to be categorised as radical under normal circumstances) are Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat, and the Nurcu network.[9]

Claiming One's Own Tradition

In this paper, I would like to attend to the negotiation of religious culture, tradition, and heritage. We are also going to see how Muslim culture manifests in spite of the difficult conditions outlined above. Although an effort is made to portray Russian religious culture as inclusive, evidence suggests that some influential individuals and institutions would prefer to conceal a Muslim presence in history and culture (Schmoller 2021). I argue that Ural Muslims react to the attempt of configuring a Russian religious heritage and of permanently fixing a category that used to be more accommodating and compliant by claiming their own tradition. In these pages, this is achieved by embarking on a local Muslim pilgrimage. I further try to show how the interaction of Muslim pilgrims with their environment has an effect on both the people involved and the surrounding space. Their religious practices help to manifest a lived Muslim culture and thus to transform the environment into a mythic homeland. I want to suggest that this transformation must be understood neither as imaginary nor symbolic but as real. [10]

Both points, the negotiation of religious predominance and the manifestation of another culture, deserve to be treated in more detail. They are the outcome of a specific type of religious contact to be observed in Russia. In circumstances where the state develops a new imperial consciousness, where Slavic culture is being elevated to a superior rank, and where the Russian Orthodox Church becomes increasingly powerful and influential, the relationship between majority and minority culture appears to be imbalanced. While one culture, with its accompanying religion, seems to be omnipresent, the other must struggle for every inch of space. The answer to the question raised by this special issue—"whose presence, whose absences"—may be disappointing to members of the Muslim minority in Russia, even though that does not mean that one cannot resort to subversive strategies. Yet curiously, the terms of engaging with religious culture seem to be rarely either subverted or contested. In the discussion about religions considered to be "traditional" for Russia, we saw that people and institutions refer to "tradition" in order to legitimate beliefs and practices; their own as well as those of other communities.[10] And since members of the Muslim minority likewise employ the [11]

9 For the repression of the Nurcu movement in Russia, see Tuna (2020).

10 Here, tradition is used and understood in a positive sense as something precious that has been preserved throughout the ages (Krech and Karis 2017, 1).

concept of tradition, the frame for the picture of the religious landscape painted by the Russian state remains intact. Some Muslims, however, turn to tradition with the aim of *differentiating* themselves from mainstream culture. By claiming their own tradition, they therefore do not question the picture *per se*—to once more take up the above metaphor—, but they question the composition of motives or pigments. They are unwilling to accept a representation of Russia where Islam plays no or only a marginal role.

[12] Going on a local Muslim pilgrimage would be one of the means to claim one's own tradition. After the repression in the Soviet period, and despite the current promotion of Orthodox Christian culture, Muslim believers may decide to move on the paths that their ancestors have been using and pay their respects at the graves of local saints. Thereby, they can preserve the memory of historic personages and events, are able to revive the pilgrimage as a religious custom with all of its accompanying practices, and can possibly pass this custom on to the next generation. The process may be perceived as a manifestation of a lived Muslim culture, a term that refers to the concept of lived religion in the social sciences (Orsi 2002; McGuire 2008; Knibbe and Kupari 2020). As an approach, lived religion pays special attention to how religion is being practised in the everyday lives of people. At this point, I think it is relevant to stress that the circumstances people live in inform their practices, but these practices likewise contribute to the formation of quotidian lives.[11] By engaging in religious practices associated with a people's ancestors, a legitimation of their culture and the self-assertion of a disregarded identity take place. If it were only for this, the discussion would be consigned to the realm of identity politics. But I think that we have to go further, as the manifestation of Muslim minority culture in the Russian Urals not only helps to determine and sustain a people's heritage but might also have a transformative effect on the environment and conjure their homeland.

[13] But what is it that Ural Muslims look back to and consider their homeland and heritage? The following section attends to perceptions of historical continuity and rupture. It is by relating to specific periods in time that local Muslim pilgrimage brings about another reality.

A State of Integrity

[14] In their accounts, my interlocutors from Barda repeatedly refer to an era in the past when a Tatar Muslim state existed that both protected its citizens and preserved their interests. The image of a polity takes shape whose territorial integrity was being upheld, just as it was possible within those borders to prevent any corruption of Tatar culture taking place. This idea can also be found in a book by the author Amir Fatyhov (2008) about the ancestors of the Permian Tatars. In this section of the article, I draw both on statements from interlocutors encountered in the ethnographic field and on the work by Fatyhov to briefly outline the idealised image of said Tatar state and the periods following its decline.

[15] In the memory of Muslims from the south of Perm Krai, a special place is reserved for the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria that existed at the confluence of the Kama and Volga rivers from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries—a period now retaining the status of a golden age of Tatar rule. Volga Bulgaria fell apart as a result of recurring Mongol attacks, and the territory was incorporated into the Ulus of Juchi and later became part of the Golden Horde. From the mid-fifteenth century until 1552, a successor state of the Golden Horde, the Khanate of Kazan, occupied the same territory as Volga Bulgaria. The Khanate of Kazan was in turn

11 For a closer engagement with lived religion, see Schmoller (2020).

brought down by Ivan the Terrible and his Russian troops; an event that, according to Kappeler (2001), signifies the beginning of Russia in the condition of a multi-ethnic empire. The siege and downfall of Kazan is usually interpreted as a serious disruption of the history of Tatar civilisation, as it meant the end of sovereignty and the beginning of foreign rule. Tatars were banished from the city and driven into the periphery, while Orthodox Christian religion and Slavic culture became predominant, meaning that many Turkic Muslims were forcibly converted to Christianity over the coming centuries if they could not escape in time. In spite of its status as the primary trauma of Muslims from the Volga and Ural regions, the fall of Kazan did not turn up much as a subject of conversation in its own right among the people from Barda and rather seems to be considered an incision that occurred before the next major incident. This would be the resistance of the Cossack leader Yemelian Pugachev in relation to the Russian Empire and its ruler Catherine II. from 1773–1775.[12] The rebellion proved unsuccessful and Pugachev was eventually beheaded in Moscow. Even though a return to the conditions enjoyed by Muslims before the arrival of the Russian forces would seem most unlikely, my interlocutors think of the Pugachev rebellion as a meaningful moment where history could have taken a different course.

The references to these specific periods do, in my opinion, tell us something about the relationship between the Tatar and Bashkir Muslim minorities on the one hand and the Russian state with its Orthodox Christian religion and Slavic population on the other, the latter of which constitute a normative frame of life in contemporary Russian society. Volga Bulgaria tends to be described in very positive terms; a perfect past when people lived an undisturbed existence and their society and culture was yet untouched by influence of any hostile forces. For inhabitants of Barda, their origin from the people of Gaina, initially a Turkic tribe associated with the Bashkir ethnic group, is often stressed in conversations. Fatyhov (2008, 60) believes that the Gaina played an important protective role for the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria, as their territory constituted the northeastern border region of the realm. To better illustrate their sphere of influence, he equates their territory with the gouvernements of Viatka, Perm, and Ufa in the Russian Empire of the more recent past (Fatyhov 2008, 73), which, if seen on a map, resembles a bracket shielding the heartland of the ancient kingdom. Fatyhov points out that the Gaina as a people retained their identity even after Volga Bulgaria dissolved.[13] The other period to be briefly discussed here, the late eighteenth century that saw the rebellion of Pugachev, can be considered a troublesome time for Russian state power, as it was being challenged by an insurgent who adopted the name Peter III and portrayed himself as an alternative ruler to empress Catherine II (*Voennaâ Istoriâ Baškir. Ènciklopediâ* [Military History of the Bashkirs. An Encyclopaedia] 2013, 225–30). After the new distribution of land to Russian nobles, discontent and unrest spread among the peasantry, as it found itself subordinated to the aristocracy. Apart from the Urals, the rebellion further seized western Siberia along with the middle and lower Volga region. Pugachev also recruited fighters among the ethnic minorities by addressing their problems and grievances, and particularly the Bashkirs followed him in great numbers.[14] They hoped to be able to return to their traditional ways of life, including [16]

12 Many members of the ethnic minority populations—in the majority Bashkirs, Kalmyks, Maris, Mishars, Mordvins, Tatars, Udmurts, and Chuvashs—followed Pugachev in his struggle against the throne (*Voennaâ Istoriâ Baškir. Ènciklopediâ* [Military History of the Bashkirs. An Encyclopaedia] 2013, 225).

13 Reading the author, one senses that the particularity of the Gaina is of real importance to him and he would not want historians to simply categorise them as another ethnic Bashkir subgroup.

14 Salavat Yulaev, who joined Pugachev in his efforts and attempted to liberate his people, is today regarded a national hero in Bashkortostan.

their native faith and laws, and once more gain ownership over their former lands, waters, and forests. Possibly, some held on to the dream of once again reinstating Turkic Muslim rule.

[17] The above notions of homeland and heritage contrast considerably with more dominant accounts of Russian history. Especially the more patriotic and heroic interpretations of history tend to draw a sharp line between the Russian state in its different incarnations and the Tatar khanates with their Muslim societies. A binary opposition between "us" and "them" is set in place. Such a restrictive and exclusive reading of history usually does not consider the prior existence of Volga Bulgaria or other non-Russian states worth mentioning. But for Muslims from Barda, it constitutes a primary source of ethnic and religious identification, possibly in opposition to the new Russian national identity that is being promoted. Different from the case of Volga Bulgaria, the rebellion of Pugachev is an event that enjoyed real prominence in Soviet history-writing, as it lends itself to a Marxist analysis of class struggle. But whereas Pugachev used to be perceived as a sympathetic figure who stood up against unjust repression and exploitation, the overall picture has become more complicated with the vindication of Tsarist rule and power. Siding with Pugachev and his rebels could nowadays be interpreted as a sign of defiance towards the Russian state.

[18] In the main part of the text, we are going to see how Muslim pilgrimage draws these bygone eras and events back into the present moment. Here, it is mostly the above-mentioned image of the golden age that re-emerges and manifests itself in the surrounding. The pilgrims not only refer to those periods in an abstract sense but engage in a process that erases the line of demarcation between multiple pasts and presents. This is why—one may extend the argument—we are, in the case of this particular local pilgrimage, just as in certain other contexts, no longer only concerned with identity politics but also with a politics of reality.[15] One does become familiar with yet another aspect of history and culture that is missing in the larger picture, but the reality that takes shape differs so fundamentally from the conditions we usually accept as facts of life that one might as well abandon the first picture entirely and instead focus on a new picture in an unfamiliar frame. The Muslim pilgrims considered in this article conceive of themselves as subjects in an environment characterised by the presence of the divine as well as miraculous intervention. For the sociologist and philosopher Martin Savransky (2012, 359), a politics of reality, which he also calls ontopolitics, goes beyond representing the world, as it is furthermore involved in its formation. Turning from epistemology and representation to ontology and reality, Savransky believes, can be a way to explore different worlds instead of only reflecting upon different world*views* (Savransky 2017, 21–22). Other scholars, who, like Savransky, sympathise with the decolonial critique of a science tradition developed in Europe, have been engaged in the project of theorising world-making as a mode of politics (Blaser and Cadena 2018). In the field of heritage studies, both the politics and the aesthetics of world-making have become objects of research (Port and Meyer 2018). Relying upon the limited means of a journal article written in academic language, I will attempt to delineate the formative and transformative effect of Muslim religious practice in the Russian Urals. And building on the above, it seems appropriate to place this undertaking within the framework of an anthropology of emergence and becoming, where one tries to attune the senses to a world as it takes manifest form (Savransky 2017; Biehl and Locke 2010).

15 For examples from Kazakhstan of local pilgrimage and the alteration of a shared sense of reality, see Dubuisson / Genina (2012) and Bigozhin (2019).

The Mountains of Barda

In the following, we will be concerned with a local Muslim pilgrimage to places considered to be sacred because of the presence of living saints. Before going into more detail about the pilgrimage, let us first consider the *ghazis* (guardians or protectors), who confer special status to the sites they watch over and in whose honour the pilgrimage is undertaken. The legend of the seven *ghazis* is something I discovered on my very first visit to Barda in December 2015. I was taking a closer look at the prayer hall of the Friday mosque when the imam mukhtasib made me aware of gable-shaped ornaments on the three walls that do not contain the *mihrab* (prayer niche). These ornaments, he told me, stand for seven mountains located in the area, which are in turn associated with seven holy men. The mountains demarcate the territory, while the holy men protect it from exterior threat. During the process of mosque construction, the imam admits, he and the other members of the community thought about indicating the link between mountains and holy men on the walls of the prayer hall, but they eventually decided against it as they were building a mosque after all. [19]

In his book, Fatyhov (2008, 60) recounts the legend of the seven guardians in much the same way as it is told today by residents of Barda.[16] They were originally considered *batyr* (heroes), protecting the territory of the Gaina. Serving as lookouts on the seven mountains, the first one detecting some suspicious movement would light a fire and the others would follow suit. In reaction to the fire in the mountains, the inhabitants of the villages in the valley grabbed their weapons, leapt onto the saddles of their horses, and gathered at an agreed-upon place to deflect the impending attack. Even though we are not provided with information about who threatened the ancestors of the people of Barda, Fatyhov remarks that the *ghazis* guarded the northeastern borders of Volga Bulgaria, so they were not simply concerned about their own property but played an important protective role for the realm. [20]

But as we are going to see, the role of the seven *ghazis* is not restricted to history alone. Instead, it appears that they began to be considered holy men in time and are now venerated by a fragment of the population. Saint veneration, even if frowned upon by adherents of religious reformism, is one aspect of Muslim culture to be found in almost any country with a sizable Muslim population.[17] One may associate it with religious practices common within Sufi brotherhoods that tend to stress the absolute moral authority of the Sufi sheikh. Typically, Muslim pilgrims will pay their respects at the mausoleum or grave of the saint, but they may also seek supernatural assistance at a mountain spring, a tree, or a cave associated with him. During their lifetime, saints spread the message of God, they were Islamic scholars or simply pious individuals, and female saints are also not unheard of. Once in winter 2015 and then again in summer 2016, I had the chance to take part in local pilgrimages, and while the first one consisted of visits to Muslim cemeteries and a mausoleum, the second one took us to six of the seven mountains.[18] Indicating the composition of the two groups is no easy task, as the number of pilgrims fluctuated over the course of the day, but one may estimate that the first group consisted of six men aged 19 to 75 and the second group of five men aged 23 to 65. During the first pilgrimage through a winter landscape, our guide kept on returning to the discussion of the seven guardians by mentioning, for instance, that [21]

16 Allen Frank (2001, 38) also briefly describes the case, relying on the Tatar language version of Fatyhov's book.

17 For examples from the Volga-Urals, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, see Frank (1996), Grant (2011), and Sartori (2019), respectively.

18 The one mountain we do not visit is located too far in the distance to undertake the journey.

Figure 2 Visual reference to the seven mountains in the prayer hall of Barda's Friday mosque. Photo: Jesko Schmoller, 2015.

in the past people used to pray to a different of these holy men on each day of the week. The *ghazis* nonetheless played no major role in the event, which was very different on the second occasion, when we visited the mountains where they conducted their service and are now remembered and venerated. These mountains are called Sultan-galib, Khasan-shaikh, Sultan-Akhmet, Minlimagasum, Murat-khuzya, and Sultangali-gaziz, while we did not get to see the mountain Sait-Salim.[19] The shift from a perception of the guardians as heroes to a perception of them as saints also becomes apparent from the terminology people revert to. Our guide on both pilgrimages, whose interpretation of Islam may be considered Sufi Muslim, called the *ghazis* sultans, a term that usually designates the spiritual successor of a Muslim saint. Fatyhov (2008, 62) likewise mentions an old manuscript listing the last living sultans: Bayazit Pastamyy, Khuzya-Akhmet Yasavi, Ibragim Adgam, Ismagil' Samani, Mukhamet Gaznavi, Mukhamet Khasravani, and Fayzir Mazi. As Fatyhov (2008, 63) writes, the legend of the seven guardians leads us right into the glory days of the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria and the Gaina people watching its borders.

[22] Most certainly, it is no coincidence that the protectors of this specific territory are referred to as *ghazis*. In world history, *ghazis* have become known as military professionals fighting for Islam. According to historian Marshall Hodgson (1974, 2:582), a *ghazi* is a "warrior for the faith" who carries out *jihad*. As a literal translation for the term *ghazi*, Wolper (2013, 160) suggests "one who engages in raids against infidels." Both the medieval Ghaznavid and Seljuk states relied on *ghazi* troops for their expansion and the battle against unbelievers in South Asia and Anatolia, respectively (Hodgson 1974, 2:42, 274–75; Rahimi 2004, 87). Hodgson (1974, 2:424–28) thinks of the early Ottoman realm, characterised as militantly Islamic, that by the late fourteenth century had successfully conquered all of Anatolia as a *ghazi* state. With further nuance, Rahimi (2004, 90) designates early Ottoman rule a frontier-chieftaincy and its distinct blend of military and religious principles a "Sufi-knightly culture of honorific ethos." Curiously, the idea of a violent struggle for one's religious belief seems to have been preserved in the shape of these guardians, who are still being venerated in the south of Perm Krai today. Such legacy should perhaps not be surprising, given the fact that in the tenth century and afterwards Volga Bulgaria constituted a major centre of Islamisation for the wider region (Hodgson 1974, 2:272).

[23] While the secularly- and reformist-minded inhabitants of Barda may not bother about the *ghazis*, the devotion of Muslim pilgrims nonetheless contributes to evoking the powerful image of the frontier. The administrative district is located in a historical and cultural border zone, where the different denominations have co-existed in complex configurations over centuries. One gains the impression that at least some of the people perceive of themselves as continuing to live in a frontier space that requires an effort to protect their customs. In Barda and elsewhere in the Urals, I have encountered the use of the term *jihad* not in the above predatory sense but rather as a mode of defence against assimilation that may result in the dilution or possibly extinction of one's religious culture, often in reference to repression in Soviet times. The seven *ghazis* must be interpreted, I think, as a prospect of safety in volatile circumstances. They ensure the area's spatial and cultural integrity that people would like to see restored.

[24] Next, I will attempt to demonstrate how moving through the territory for religious purposes once more opens a gate to a world that, according to the prevailing narrative, has come to an

19 The Muslims I travel with use names that in some cases slightly divert from those in the book by Fatyhov: Sultangali, Xäsän Shayex, Sultanaxmet, Miniyar Magasum, Murat Xadshi, Sultangaziz and Saitsalim.

end. From the ethnographic accounts in the rest of this section, we may gain an idea of how lived religion has a direct effect on the environment and helps to manifest a community's outlook. Whereas one might assume that the south of Perm Krai is a peripheral spot on the map of Russia, far away from the political centre, Moscow, that since 2000 has increasingly claimed authority over the regions in various matters, but also removed from regional centres such as Yekaterinburg, practising Muslims in Barda identify different reference points for the story they tell, and in their story Barda is recognised as central. Instead of tuning in to the reality presented to them on the many TV channels loyal to the state administration, with its patriotic message to the population, and instead of adopting mainstream Russian culture with its own standards of virtue or amusement, they walk the paths that native residents from the area have taken for generations. By doing what their ancestors used to do, praying at mountain slopes and fetching water at holy springs, they conjure a counter-reality with the potential to replace the dominant picture. From a Russian Orthodox perspective, engaging in a local pilgrimage would still be a reasonable activity, even though the church recognises other saints than the Muslim ones, and the territories associated with those saints are likewise usually not the same. Compared with a Muslim spiritual geography of Russia, the Orthodox Christian variant would therefore produce an entirely different map of significant sites and routes to travel on. But even harsher is the clash with a more secular interpretation of the Russian environment. The world that becomes visible and tangible through the actions of Muslim believers is, after all, more than simply a different take on the shared "facts of life." In the other world, laws regulate our physical and spiritual existence that make little sense within the parameters established by Western European science. An example would be the flow of *baraka*, a spiritual force, the effect of which is experienced by the pilgrims. When arriving on the mountain Khasan-shaikh, our guide asked me whether I could also sense the particular energy of the place and whether it caused goosebumps on my skin. Over the course of the day, we absorbed *baraka,* and on our way home after nightfall our guide declared that he felt happy and full of spiritual energy. From a Western rationalist perspective, it would be difficult to accept a concept such as *baraka*, as it is not measurable with the devices of modern technology. And yet, *baraka* is one of the means bringing to life what lies in the distant past or used to be only legend.

The same is true for the seven *ghazis* themselves. Whereas sceptics consider them characters [25]
in a story alone and at best historical figures that have long passed away, our Muslim pilgrims regard them as very much alive and seek encounters with them. I was informed that the guardians continue to protect the territory and watch over its population, as they did several centuries ago. On the way to Sultan-galib, our guide explained how to properly interact with the saints, which is also the precondition for receiving *baraka*. Each place, according to him, is looked after by a saint and we must be respectful towards them and careful not to provoke a conflict. This applies to Barda and every other place on the planet. Therefore, the guide elaborated, we pray to each of the guardians in their respective locations, ask for a successful journey, and wish them all best. Time has no effect on them and they will stay with us until the end of days, he said. Here, it seems appropriate to quote an informant from the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi brotherhood in Ufa, who said in a conversation about the saints and other teachers of humanity that we must realise how our assumptions are all wrong: in fact, it is us who are dead and they who are alive.[20] To be able to recognise these circumstances, the Sufi brother explained, it is necessary for us to open our eyes and truly see. It should be added that the

20 For the context of this conversation, see Schmoller (2020).

guardians are not limited in their abilities as mere humans tend to be. For them, moving from one mountain to the next cannot be regarded a serious obstacle, our guide revealed, as they are able to fly through the air.

[26] The world taking shape around the pilgrims is one of wonder and miracles (*karamat*). To make a video recording of the surroundings, they brought a drone with them, and as we watched the landscape as seen from above, our guide asked me whether I could see the Arabic letters for the word "Allah" written into the mountainside. Here, the transformation of space occured before our eyes, as the other world is literally inscribed in the landscape. It was not referenced in an abstract manner but became physically apparent in that particular location, and challenged a purely rational perception of the world we live in. In the afternoon, our guide reported a second miracle. Just on the day of our pilgrimage, a baby was born in Barda and we were to expect the sacrifice of a sheep and a banquet at the mosque in the evening.

[27] It is not only by climbing up mountain slopes or by reciting surahs from the Quran that the other world becomes visible and tangible. Objects of material culture are involved in this process and these objects often relate to places and people that do not turn up in the official discourse. During the first tour of Muslim holy sites around Barda, one of the pilgrims listened to a recorded sermon of the Turkish sheikh at-Huseyni, who enjoys much popularity among Muslims in Perm Krai.[21] He lent me his earphones and I found that the audio recording gave a wholly different atmosphere to the experience of sacred space. With the melodic vocals in the background, it seemed as if another context was established to interpret the landscape before my eyes. Then, he presented me with a photo of the Sufi sheikh and suggested that I carry it around in my wallet, so it would protect me wherever I went. On the day before the second pilgrimage, I sat at a coffee shop with another young Muslim who had just returned from a visit to the sheikh's place of residence in Turkey, and when seeing the photo in my wallet was so overcome with joy that he gave me a small candy wrapped in plastic foil. Just as the above audio recording and the photo, the candy would enable me to receive the *baraka* of the master. In the evening, this young Muslim got to meet some of the other community members that planned to come along on the pilgrimage and he distributed candies among them. They also showed much interest in a fragrance called *misk* that was blessed by at-Huseyni and which I was supposed to rub into my eyebrows.[22] When undertaking our tour of the area's mountains the next day, the pilgrims made out a direct relation between those objects and the success of our journey. Our guide said that the candy he ate the previous evening may have been a precondition for our entire pious undertaking. On Sultan-galib, we noticed a pleasant breeze that one of our companions interpreted as another one of God's gifts. At-Huseyni was included in the prayer in this particular place, as the tour may have taken a different turn without the blessed candies. By activating our senses, hearing, sight, taste, and smell, the objects described here helped to materialise the other world that at first resembled only an idea. In this other world, one must assume, a Sufi master from Turkey is of more relevance than the mayor of Barda or the governor of Perm. And again, these objects have properties one would not expect to discover in Russian everyday life.

[28] Even though the world that assumed its form before our eyes conformed in many respects to the golden age of Turkic Muslim rule, an awareness of other periods was likewise noticeable among the pilgrims. Once more, the idea of the frontier was evident in their accounts

21 See Nazli Alimen (2018) for more information on the Menzil brotherhood, whose headquarters are located in the vicinity of the Turkish-Syrian border.

22 For more information on the use of fragrance as part of Muslim religious practice, see Schmoller (2021).

Figure 3 A view of Sultan-galib. Photo: Jesko Schmoller, 2016.

and indications of cultural contact and minority resilience. Until the beginning of the age of empire, when Russia started to invade foreign territory, the ancestors of the residents of Barda lived by the river Kama, where it was not necessary to cultivate the land for agricultural purposes (Fatyhov 2008, 69). But when Russian settlers arrived in the area, their ancestors were prohibited to further live on the banks of the river—on the ground of their forefathers, as Faytkhov stresses—and were instead driven into the forests and mountains to settle in more difficult terrain. Since these were the times of forced conversion to Christianity, many Muslims not only lost their land but their way of life as well.[23] Fatyhov (2008, 60) speculates that some of the village dwellers further withdrew into the forests in order to keep their traditions alive. During the pilgrimage, one gained the impression that the Muslim pilgrims felt intimately familiar with the landscape of Barda, where their ancestors preserved their religious beliefs and practices in secret. If this is where, against all odds, it was possible to keep the Islamic tradition alive, why would one abandon it now? Every once in a while, the armed resistance of the local population against the state turned up as a subject. On one occasion, we stopped at a crossroads and, pointing to one of the roads, a pilgrim informed me that two-and-a-half centuries back, Salavat Yulaev was marching north with his troops from there to attack the stronghold of Osa. History-conscious inhabitants of the area consider the rebellion of Pugachev and Salavat Yulaev's participation in it legitimate measures to regain what used to be theirs. By moving with a particular purpose through the familiar environment, this aspect of history provides an alternative frame to interpret and experience the land. In contrast to the seven *ghazis*, no one expects to suddenly encounter Pugachev or one of his rebel troops. But once again, the territory becomes a place of resistance, where people claim their own tradition, just as Tatar-language Barda resists the dominance of the Russian language. In conversations with local Muslims, the struggle for the preservation of one's heritage, if religious or not, can become suddenly perceptible. In summer 2016, I was getting ready to use the *banya* (sauna) of one of the imams who also took part in the first pilgrimage, and while he tied the birch rods meant to stimulate the circulation of blood in the body, he reflected about the origins of the *banya*. Is it not strange, he asked, that everyone speaks of the "Russian *banya*" now, even though it was originally a Muslim invention? Both the "Russian *pel'meni*" (dumplings) and the "Russian forest" have the same origins, he added. A sense of loss is apparent in this narrative of cultural appropriation. Having lost their land, the local inhabitants came under the influence of a foreign empire where they had no choice but to submit to the state's nationality politics and Russian cultural hegemony. It is before this background that Muslims from Barda strive to restore a lived Muslim culture.

Conclusion

A religious pilgrimage may be motivated by a variety of reasons, co-existing with one another. [29]
In this article with a focus on the Russian Urals, we have taken a closer look at one of them: the negotiation of history and culture. It turns out that the interactions of inhabitants of Barda with the local environment are informed by notions of homeland and heritage that differ in content—if not necessarily in form—from perspectives consistent with the sense of a new Russian national identity. Volga Bulgaria emerges as a state that protects its subjects from foreign invasion and the corruption of their culture. Muslims of vernacular outlook from the area around Barda venerate guardians of the territory, who are known as *ghazis*. The figure of

23 On the matter of conversion in Russian history, see Kefeli (2014).

the *ghazi* conveys associations of the frontier, as the land of the ancestors of the local inhabitants was located in a border zone. Two ideas, Islam and warfare, are combined in the *ghazi*, whose duty it is to protect the faith. In reference to the rebellion of Pugachev, we recognise Barda once more as a place of resistance. But while in the past violent struggles ensued over control of the land, people are now rather engaged in finding the right interpretive frames for how to perceive their history and culture. Because their reference points contrast with those of the ethnic Russian majority population, they help to place Barda in another conceptual cosmos.

[30] Both Muslim believers' connection to the land and their sense of belonging to a larger community indicates a concern with tradition whose perception undergoes changes in circumstances of contact with mainstream society. After a period where the Russian population grappled with being exposed to the harsh climate of a new economy and where some mourned the decay of the Soviet Union, a certain consensus has been reached as to what constitutes Russian heritage and tradition. The official interpretation of tradition is not challenged in principle by members of the Muslim minority; it is rather confronted with an alternative tradition. One reaction of ethnic Tatars and Bashkirs to increasingly formal structures in the composition of Russian history and culture would be another configuration of the major historic events and the people who helped inform Muslim minority culture in its current manifestations. The assumed integrity of Volga Bulgaria might be a response to an integrity now claimed by Russian nationalists at the expense of any Muslim contributions to Russian culture. In that case, the consolidation of tradition on the one side could also cause a consolidation of tradition on the other side.

[31] The Muslims that undertake the pilgrimage to the seven mountains of Barda are not claiming autonomy for the space in question. Instead, they claim a bit of space to live their lives in accordance with religious prescriptions. They wish to be granted the authority to interpret reality in compliance with their beliefs, which may be understood as a political claim after all. By treading the paths of their ancestors, Muslim pilgrims transform their surroundings and turn them into an ideal place. A land resembling the kingdom of Volga Bulgaria emerges from oblivion, where members of the Muslim minority find refuge and conditions of integrity. With the administrative vocabulary at hand, it would be impossible to categorise this realm, and one is unable to grasp what goes on there when relying on nothing but a rational mind. The guardians, we must be aware, are not simply metaphors, but they *do* protect the place from misfortune. The flow of *baraka* brings to life the landscapes of the dead, and a pilgrim may feel the loving gaze of a Muslim saint upon him and be taken into his care. Muslim believers from the Urals with a vernacular conception of Islam are convinced that in the material world all matter comes to waste, while the saints enjoy an eternal existence in the other world, which, as we have seen, can be inscribed in the landscape. By erasing the line of demarcation between this world and the next, between present and past, the pilgrims once more conduct a journey through the homeland that was lost to a temporal power with little understanding for their traditional ways of life.

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"Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" in (Post-)Colonial Russia

Victoria Kravtsova

ABSTRACT This article focuses on post- and decolonial thought in contemporary Russia's cultural debates by looking at the novel *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* by Guzel Yakhina and its reception in the "center" of Russia and in Tatarstan—the region described in the book. The insufficient presence of post- and decolonial perspectives amongst public intellectuals is highlighted, showing how the book, which was described as postcolonial, actually supports Russian (neo-)imperialism. The main argument is that the book erases the problematic aspects of Soviet universalism in terms of ethnic and religious difference and supports the centralizing policies of the contemporary Russian state, which is increasingly fusing with the Orthodox church. Furthermore, it presents the 'deislamization' of the protagonist as her 'emancipation' and erases the subjectivity of non-Russian women in the Russian Empire, the USSR and contemporary Russia. Situating the novel in the context of decolonial feminist scholarship, the article suggests vectors for further development of cultural debates in a country that is currently waging a colonial war in Ukraine.

KEYWORDS Islam, gender, Russia, Tatarstan, colonialism, decolonization, USSR, Islamic feminism

Introduction

The Russian Federation, which is becoming more and more closed and authoritarian, especially since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is long known for its powerful propaganda machine represented by government-controlled channels such as *Perviy* (*The First*)[1]. Therefore, any product that exists most likely supports the Russian government's politics—including any cultural production. For instance, *Obitel'* (*Abode*) is one of the series produced for the channel, which is an adaptation of a book by Zakhar Prilepin, who is a known active supporter of the war in Eastern Ukraine[2]. The book touches on the subject of Stalin's [1]

1 All translations from Russian by the author unless indicated otherwise.

2 Kucherskaya, Maya. *"Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza" Guzeli Yakhinoy -sil'nyi debuytnyi roman o raskulachennoy tatarke* ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina - a powerful book about a Tatar woman repressed by the state]. "Vedomosti." Accessed June 28, 2020. https://www.vedomosti.ru/lifestyle/articles/2015/06/10/595867-zuleiha-otkrivaet-glaza-guzeli-yahinoi---silnii-debyutnii-roman-o-raskulachennoi-tatarke; Sergeeva, Nadezhda. Guzel' Yakhina. *"Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [Guzel Yakhina. Zuleikha Opens Her

repressions and was thus often used as a comparison with a more recent cultural product of the same scale, *Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza* (*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*) by Guzel Yakhina (2015). The book tells the story of a woman from a Tatar village who, at the time of the 1930s Soviet collectivization, is displaced to Siberia—together with other relatively wealthy peasant families (*kulaks*), former aristocrats and intelligentsia.

[2] The first novel of Moscow-based, Kazan-born PR specialist and learned screenwriter Yahkina received outstanding attention almost straight after its publication. Ludmilla Ulitskaya, one of Russia's most famous writers, wrote a preface for the book; "Love and tenderness in hell" says her quote on the cover. The book won two big literary awards and was widely praised by the pro-government Russian media: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*[3] wrote about it, *RIA Novosti* interviewed[4] Yakhina. The writer toured the country with book presentations[5] and the website devoted to *The Year of Literature*[6] was filled with stories about her. Yakhina was also chosen to write a text for *Total'nyi Diktant*, a government project offering citizens to test their mastery of the Russian language[7]. At the same time, both the book and its subsequent TV adaptation caused a lot of controversy in Tatarstan, where the events of the first part of *Zuleikha* take place.

[3] Looking at the book and its reception, this article argues that *Zuleikha* supports Russia's contemporary (neo-)imperialism.[8] Mentioning problems such as repressions in the USSR, forced displacement, colonial relationship of the center to the periphery as well as the intersection of gender and Islam, the book does not challenge the current status quo; instead, the Russocentrism and suppression of ethnic communities only intensifies. It preserves the image of the USSR which the contemporary Russian regime capitalizes on: the heroic state that won the Second World War and successfully restrained the main enemy, the USA. To support this argument, the article begins with a summary of the literature that demonstrates the colonial character of the Russian Empire, the USSR and their successor, the Russian Federation. The paper also examines how Russian liberal intellectuals are continuously supporting Russian imperialism by denying the existence of local racism and colonialism. The book and its se-

Eyes]. "Zvezda." Accessed September 19, 2020. https://zvezdaspb.ru/index.php?page=8&nput=2662; Semeshkina, Yanita. *Zuleikha, otkroy nashi glaza* [Zuleikha, open our eyes]. "Russkiy Pioner." Accessed July 6, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/spetsarchive/m/single/45/single/_job/27582; Trunin, Konstantin. Guzel' Yakhina, *"Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza", 2015* [Guzel Yakhina, "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes", 2015.] "Blog of literary critic, writer, reviewer." Accessed November 26, 2020. http://trounin.ru/yakhina15/.

3 Basinskyi, Pavel. *Neveroyanoe. Ochevidnoye* [Unbelievable, Obvious]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed May 25, 2020. https://rg.ru/2015/05/25/basinsky.html. Pulson, Klarissa. *Bolshaya karta dlya malenkoi Zuleikhi* [Big map for little Zuleikha]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed on November 17, 2020. https://rg.ru/2015/11/18/yahina.html.

4 Kocharova, Anna. Guzel' Yakhina: *"Dlya menya ne bylo vybora, o chem pisat"'* [Guzel Yakhina: "I did not have a choice about what to write"]. "RIA Novosti." Accessed March 24, 2020. https://ria.ru/20160301/1382525469.html.

5 *Chitatel'skaya konferentsiya po romanu Guzel' Yakhinoy "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [Reader's conference on Guzel Yakhina's Novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes"]. "Regional Library of Sakhalin." Accessed November 20, 2020. http://libsakh.ru/sobytija/novosti/novost-polnostju/article/chitatelskaja-konferencija-po-romanu-guzel-jakhinoi-zul/.

6 Guzeva, Alexandra. *Zuleikha kaka semeynaya istoriya Yakhinoy* [Zuleikha as Yakhina's family history]. "God Literatury." Accessed April 25, 2020. https://godliteratury.ru/projects/zuleykha-kak-semeynaya-istoriya-yakhinoy.

7 Reshetnikova, Natalya. *Guzel' otkrivaet azy* [Guzel reveals the foundations]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed January 15, 2021. https://rg.ru/2018/01/30/reg-sibfo/guzel-iahina-boialas-kogda-pisala-tekst-dlia-totalnogo-diktanta.html.

8 I write (neo-) in brackets to highlight that the current Russian imperialism and colonialism is at the same time new, as it has developed after the fall of the USSR, but is also old, in a sense that it builds on and is a continuation of the politics of the Russian Empire and USSR.

ries as well as the public feedback in the 'center' of Russia, in Tatarstan and abroad will be analysed. In the following part the perception and influence of the book will be connected to the status of Tatarstan within the country and to the notion of Russian colonialism in general. Lastly, a gender dimension is added to the analysis of the book and its effects.

Imported Theories, Ignorant Intellectuals

[4] The language of postcolonialism has established itself in analyses of the relationship between the 'first' and the 'third' world since the 1980s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars from Ukraine and Belarus, the former 'periphery' of the Empire, started applying this lens to the policies of the Russian Empire and the USSR[9]. Three decades later, in Russia, the center of the former Empire, post- and decolonial[10] approaches still do not receive much attention of the scholarly community. As Ukrainian researcher Chernetsky writes, since the 1990s postcolonialism has been "the only major contemporary theoretical discourse" (Chernetsky 2007, 12) consistently ignored by Russian social scientists. He provides an example of a 1998 Russian survey of the Western"[11] discourse on postmodernism, where the most important postcolonial scholars Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak were labelled "a well-known literary scholar of a leftist-anarchist orientation" and a "socially engagée feminist deconstructionist" (Chernetsky 2007, 36).

[5] Even getting into Russian academia, postcolonialism becomes transformed to support imperialism. For instance, the "inner colonization" theory of a well-known public intellectual Alexander Etkind (2003) is negligent of racial, cultural and religious discrimination and perpetuates the homogenizing image of Russia as a "self-colonizing state" (Chernetsky 2007, 46), erasing inequality between Russians and other peoples of the former USSR. Anna Engelhardt believes that similar processes continue in today's cultural sphere: exhibitions and events about colonialism do not mention Russia,[12] public debates around non-Russian musicians erase their non-Russian identities[13]. It can therefore be argued that the ideas and discourses shared and promoted by liberal public intellectuals reinforce Russian colonialism, racism and xenophobia.

[6] Kharhordin, who called Russian scholars "pathfinders" (Khahordin 2015, 1296) in the vast sea of theories bestowed upon them after the fall of the Iron Curtain, believes that Russian

9 Engelhardt, Anna. *The Futures of Russian Decolonization*. "Strelka Mag." Accessed March 18, 2021. https://strelkamag.com/en/article/the-futures-of-russian-decolonization?fbclid=IwAR2KJwmBwzaJRH73mUTSRX7q4o8dVbKPSjdlE9nOwW1hbwrP5o0aU2fhjRg.

10 Even though post- and decolonial theory have different origins and approaches to knowledge production, in the article they are perceived as two interconnected ways of thinking through the relationships of colonial dependence that reveal themselves in culture and literature as well as on day-to-day forms of oppression.

11 Such categories as 'Western'; 'third,' 'second' or 'first world' are written in parentheses to highlight their constructed nature. They are used to portray the lasting inequalities between these parts of the world as well as limitation of certain discourses. 'Western' means produced in the 'West' (U.S. and Western Europe) or attached to it symbolically (for instance, LGBTIQ* rights are perceived as a 'Western' idea). The 'first world' or Global North is a synonym of the 'West.' The 'third world' or Global South, at the same time, refer to the formerly colonized countries of the Americas, Africa and Asia. The 'second world' is a name for the countries that fall into neither of these categories and are part of the former Eastern Block. They can also be referred to as postsocialist countries. A separate part of this category are the countries that were part of the former USSR.

12 Ibid.

13 Sinyaev, Nikolay. *"Sledit' za rukami": rabota kolonual'nykh infrastruktur i eyo analiz. Interviu s Annoy Engelhardt* ["To Watch the Hands": Colonial Infrastructure Operation and Analysis. Interview with Anna Engelhardt]. "Krapiva." Accessed December 25, 2020. https://vtoraya.krapiva.org/sledit-za-rukami-25-11-2020.

academics limited themselves to using the lens of post-communism (not postmodernism or postcolonialism) due to the inequality of the global academic market (Khahordin 2015, 1294). It is true that the "West" has always had the privilege of formulating "high theory," while the "rest" had to limit themselves to supplying cases for analysis (Tlostanova 2011). However, the ignorance of postcolonialism by Russian intellectuals is connected not only to their marginalized position in global academia but also to their implication in the colonial and (neo-)imperialist politics of the former imperial center. As Shestakova and Engelhardt (2021, 224) have shown, islamophobia and racism have been characteristic of such Soviet dissidents as Brodsky or Sakharov. Post-Soviet liberal intellectuals follow the same logic. Not being fully accepted as 'Western' subjects, they use the discourse of 'whiteness' to reassert the place of the country in the project of modernity "while simultaneously clinging to Russia's authenticity" (Zakharov 2015; Krivonos 2018, 1149).

[7] Striving to prove their proximity to whiteness[14], Russian intellectuals, including those usually described as 'liberals' or 'democratic opposition,' consistently ignore post- and decolonial thought and activism, associated with the problems of the Global South from which they try to distance themselves. Racism and colonialism are presented as problems of the former 'third' and 'first world,' but not of the former 'second,' postsocialist world.[15] Krivonos thinks that this way, the Russian regime tries to challenge the dominant global position of the 'West,' "reconstructing the Russian nation as 'true Europe' that will carry the 'white man's burden' " (Krivonos 2018, 1149). In this discourse, the 'West' is portrayed as "washed over by the flood of non-white migrants and indulging in self-destructive 'political correctness' " (Krivonos 2018, 1149). For instance, when *Black Lives Matter* protests happened in the USA, Russian 'liberal' intellectuals described it as a completely foreign problem. They tended to identify with the white part of the local population, compared the protests with the "dawn" of 'Western' civilization (Djagalov 2021) and invented a hashtag "Russian Lives Matter," reinforcing Etkind's (2003) narrative in which everyone was equally oppressed by the state in the Russian Empire and the USSR and it continues to be so in contemporary Russia.

[8] Russian identity created by the state with the 'West' as its "constituting other" (Tolz 1999, 995) is white and "civilized" (Zakharov 2015, 126), "with colour-based references to people's phenotypical traits and racialisation of people from the Caucasian region and Central Asia as 'black' " (Roman 2002, 2002; in Krivonos 2018, 1149). As Krivonos writes, "through the development of physical anthropology, state discourses and anti-immigrant movements in the post-Soviet Russia, 'Russianness' has been reinscribed into whiteness as part of the 'civilised,' 'modernised' and 'racially superior' West" (Krivonos 2018, 1149). At the same time, such peoples as Ukrainians or Belarusians are constructed as "fraternal," erasing their subjectivity and difference (Masnenko 2018). From the two Chechen wars to the war in Georgia and the two invasions into Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, Russia is destroying people, animals and land to fulfill its (neo-)imperialist ambitions outside of the country, meanwhile preserving and strengthening colonial structures inside through the centralization of governance. This article demonstrates how a particular cultural product can support these politics. The next

14 Whiteness refers to "a set of conditions that maintain ones privilege of positionality as a 'neutral' Soviet/Russian citizen" (Shestakova and Engelhardt (Distributed Cognition Cooperative) 2021, 226).

15 Uzarashvili, Lana. *"Ty dolzhna byt' luchsche, chem oni": kak rabotaet rasism v Rossii* ["You should be better than them": how racism works in Russia]. "Sh.e." Accessed October 20, 2020. https://she-expert.org/istoriya/ty-dolzhna-byt-luchshe-chem-oni-kak-rabotaet-rasizm-v-rossii?fbclid=IwAR2YO2PZ55af5C9mqCzzS9BUu-tKxlvXDP6NCOrGdb65S76HmiJ3kFS21zU.

chapter introduces the reader to the plot of *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* by Guzel Yakhina and links it to the history and present of Tatarstan, where the events take place in the book.

The Domestic 'Other'

> Zuleikha opens her eyes. The sun is beating down, blinding her and cutting her head to pieces. The vague outline of trees all around her are quivering in a sparkling dance of sunbeams. [9]
> – Are you feeling unwell? Yusuf is leaning toward her, looking at her face. – Do you not want me to go?
> Her son's eyes are enormous and a thick-green: they are her eyes. Zulaikha's own eyes are looking at her from her son's face. She shakes her head and pulls him further into the forest. (Yakhina 2015, 415)

In one of the final scenes of the book, Zuleikha's son boards a boat to begin his journey to St. Petersburg to become a painter. This move completes the story of the liberation of a traditional subject. Yusuf continues his mother's journey from backwardness of a Tatar village to the Soviet/Russian modernity of the former capital and then perhaps further to the West—to Paris. The 'Westernization' of Yusuf also happens through a change of his name: Ignatov, the murderer of his father, helps the boy by giving him new documents in which he is no more the son of a Tatar peasant but of the Soviet NKVD commissar Ignatov. Yusuf Valiyev, the son of a traditional Muslim, becomes Iosif Ignatov—a modern secular subject. [10]

In this narrative, the Soviet project is represented as beneficial to 'backward' Tatars. In one of the interviews Yakhina said that she wanted to counterpose "the national" with "the universal"[16]. The Soviet ideology, thus, is seen by her as simply "universal" and Stalin, who was responsible for collectivization and deportation of numerous nations, is described as "a wise man, whose eyes look kind, as if he was a father, and makes one feel calm and protected" (Yakhina 2015, 38). This portrayal of Soviet politics ignores their (neo-)imperialist and colonial character and does not leave space for the problematization of the erasure of the national cultures that they have led to. To show how this side of the book also supports the (neo-)imperialism and (neo-)colonialism of the contemporary Russia, the book's content and reception is connected to the history and present of Tatarstan. The article will not focus on the way Siberia is portrayed in the book, which, however, can be subjected to a separate analysis, as it is hard not to associate it with the images of the colonization of the Americas by European settlers.[17] [11]

As the author and the heroine of the book come from Tatarstan, the focus will be on the position of this region within the colonial matrix of the Russian Empire, the USSR and contemporary Russia. Tatarstan became part of Russia already under the rule of Czar Ivan the Terrible. Gradskova believes that the specificity of the "imperial politics in the Volga-Ural region" (Gradskova 2019, 7) was about Russia aiming more at the integration of nations living in the region through "education and Christianization" (Gradskova 2019, 7). Tatarstan "has [12]

16 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel' Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. "Radio Svoboda." Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcbtlZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk.

17 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm.

historically had an amenable relationship with Russia's leadership" (Keenan 2013, 74), exercised relative freedom of cultural and religious self-expression and "has long been a model region for religious and ethnic tolerance" (Keenan 2013, 71). However, the "loyalty to the empire [of Tatars] was constantly under suspicion" (Gradskova 2019, 16), as the "Muslim population of the Volga-Ural region was frequently accused of bringing threats of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism" (Gradskova 2019, 33).

> [...] similar to the Western Europeans (Said 1977), Russians saw the population of the Volga-Ural region mainly through an orientalist lens, even if, as Tlostanova rightly notes, this Orient often seemed to be regarded as a less perfect Orient than the Orient of Western colonization (Tlostanova 2008). (Gradskova 2019, 16) [13]

The October revolution was welcomed by Muslim reformists, Jadids, many of whom joined the revolutionary movement (Gradskova 2019). Soon, however, the Soviet state began to suppress both local nationalist movements and Islam. As Jesko Schmoller writes, "the nationality policies adopted after founding the Soviet Union were meant to strengthen people's national consciousness and [...] thus, weaken Islam and divide the Muslim population" (2018, 109). The USSR "worked to produce a unified Soviet society of convinced atheists, conscious Communists, and committed patriots" (Smolkin 2018, 196)—secularism served "as a disciplinary project concerned with effective governance and the formation of rational citizen-subjects" (Smolkin 2018, 9). Socialist culture was supposed to become a new religion (Habeck 2014): "Houses of worship were replaced by cinemas, graveyards – by parks, and socialist holidays were introduced to coincide with commonly observed religious ones." (Luehrmann 2011, 7) [14]

Even though the USSR preserved certain forms of 'national' cultures, it has determined how these would look like. For instance, non-Russian languages were put under threat with "the alphabet officially changed from Arabic to Latin and then Cyrillic in an attempt to bring about a uniform Soviet identity" (Keenan 2013, 74). Russian language and culture, at the same time, became a bonding neutrality that everyone had to accept. "Despite the secularization of the state, the party's commitment to atheism, the vision of radical social transformation through cultural revolution, and several anti-religious and atheist campaigns, Soviet Communism never managed to overcome religion or produce an atheist society" (Smolkin 2018, 3). What it produced was a colonial structure in which 'national republics' represented both their 'traditional' backwardness and the Soviet success in bringing them progress. "Contradictory emphases on both cultural specificity and its erasure produced a simultaneous fascination with and repulsion by the 'different' and 'exotic' 'other' cultures" (Caffee 2013, 14). Soviet colonial violence in today's Tatarstan culminated in repressions against Kazan Tatars when thousands were sent to GULAG in 1929-1932 and 1937-1938. Collectivization and deportations remain an unrecognized crime and unresolved trauma of many peoples of the USSR. Apart from the physical extermination of 'national minorities,' more than 70 years within the framework of the Soviet 'friendship of peoples' also meant losing their language, religion and culture. [15]

Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes (Yakhina 2015) portrays the displacement of Tatars to Siberia uncritically as liberation and enlightenment. The author does not mention the inter-generational trauma of losing the connection to land and culture that such processes always entail. The book also repeats and reinforces the colonial relationship to Tatars within the Empire—they are depicted as 'barbarians' and contrasted with communists, who are portrayed as white [16]

Russians[18]. While Zuleikha's Tatar husband is big, hairy and dark, communist Ignatov is white, slim, hairless, with white teeth, beautiful eyes and "strong fingers" (Yakhina 2015, 13). While sex with the Tatar husband is mere suffering, sex with Ignatov becomes a revelation: "Everything that she was taught since childhood went away. And the new that came instead washed away her fears" (Yakhina 2015, 90). In the book, Ignatov and his friend call Tatarstan "Tataria" (Yakhina 2015, 19), a Russian variation of the republic's name nowadays used in a derogatory manner (while other parts of the former USSR—Bashkortostan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan—are still predominantly called by these 'russified' names). Soviet modernity helps Zuleikha to get away from the backward traditions of her "barbaric" nation. The liberation of the heroine continues with her son's fate as described above.

[17] Another aspect of Zuleikha's liberation is her departure from Islam, which she gradually allows herself not to follow. From time to time, Yakhina mentions how she began to pray more rarely and more hastily, getting used to not having someone "supervising" her from above (Yakhina 2015, 69). Though Islam is frequently mentioned in the book, it is presented only through oppressive rules, rituals and superstitions. Communists, who come from the 'Orthodox' parts of Russia, interchangeably call Tatars "pagans" and "Muslims," equalizing the two (Yakhina 2015, 18). Such portrayal of Islam is especially problematic when one takes into account the "concern in the Russian Federation about 'a new wave of Islamic radicalism' and a 'further expansion of Islamic extremism' " (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003, 75) that began to grow in the early 1990s and is historically used to justify occupation.

[18] The collapse of the USSR brought a revival of interest in both national culture and religion in Tatarstan (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003, 75). These developments were described as "two parallel processes – the Islamization of Tatar identity and the Tatarization of Islamic identity" (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003a, 75). "Islam has become the primary indicator of Tatar-ness; for much of the population, indeed, the two have become practically synonymous" (Yemelianova and Pilkington 2003, 62). Tuna writes that "anti-Muslim sentiments surged in the country against the background of the Chechen conflict in the 1990s and, by the turn of the millennium, the influx of migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia" (Tuna 2020, 28). Fueled by two Chechen wars, the "growth of anti-Muslim prejudice at a national scale in Russia" (Tuna 2020, 28) mixed into the global surge of Islamophobia after the events of 9/11 in the U.S. Russia returned to "the late-Soviet practices of regulation and containment in managing religious communities" (Tuna 2020, 28).

> [19] Anti-extremist legislation penetrated the entire life of the country after 2006 and has served not only the political elites or the law enforcement agencies, but has also increasingly been exploited as a universal instrument of repression by local authorities seeking to suppress their opponents, by different groups of bureaucracy as a weapon in disputes and, apparently, by some individuals trying to advance their personal agendas. (Verkhovsky 2010, 37)

[20] At the same time, in Tatarstan Islam became closely linked to the fight for independence. After the fall of the USSR, more than 60 percent of the population of Tatarstan voted for its sovereignty. However, the republic got only limited autonomy within the federal state. For moderate Tatar nationalists, "Islam was a central component of the nation's spiritual revival, but the ultimate goal was still the republic's independence" (Schmoller 2018, 110). Radical nationalists associated with the organisation *Ittifaq* believed Islam was superior to the

18 "Whiteness" is written in parentheses to highlight that race is not a biological, but a cultural category.

nation and needed to be "purified" from all "moderate interpretations" (Schmoller 2018, 111). Putin's centralizing reforms brought "an end to any hopes for sovereignty that a segment of the Tatar population might have held" (Schmoller 2018, 112). Centralization continues—for instance, in 2018 a language reform was introduced that made studying national languages at school voluntary, causing strong resistance in the republic[19].

[21] According to Schmoller, "the events in Tatarstan in the 1990s and early 2000s […] helped bring about a switch from an identity primarily based on ethnicity to an identity more strongly informed by religious belonging than previously" (2018, 109). He believes that "the failure of the political sovereignty of Tatarstan made some people call the usefulness of nationalist political activity into question and caused a further shift towards religious identification" (2018, 113). Today, the Tatar identity remains related to Islam and Tatar nationalism continues to exist in both "secular and fundamentalist religious convictions" (Schmoller 2018, 113). Tatars articulate their national identity "primarily in opposition to a Russian 'other' " (Omel'chenko, Sabirova, et al. 2003, 211) or against *Kriashens* (Christian(ized) Tatars) (Omel'chenko, Sabirova, et al. 2003, 214). In Tatarstan, there is a feeling that Moscow is exaggerating the Islamist menace to further centralize the state and suppress political opponents (Keenan 2013, 76) to prevent them from undermining "centuries of Russian-Tatar cohabitation" (Omel'chenko, Pilkington, et al. 2003, 274). In these conditions, this article argues that *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (Yakhina 2015) is influenced by and supports the politics of the (neo-)imperialist Russian state, where Islam is seen as a threat and Tatars as a backwards 'Other' to whom Soviet universalism is ultimately beneficial. The following part supports this argument by describing the difference of the reception of the book in "central Russia"[20], in Tatarstan and abroad.

Multiple Critiques: Metropolitan and (Post-)Colonial

[22] As mentioned previously, the book was met with outstandingly positive reactions from state-affiliated Russian media and from such public figures as the writer Zakhar Prilepin, who said the book contained nothing "politically opportunistic" and "no distortions in any direction."[21] The "liberal" part of public intellectuals was less impressed by Zuleikha's "cinematographic language:"[22] Galina Yuzefovich[23], as well as some other reviewers[24], criticized its simplic-

19 *Yazykovoy vopros v Tatarstane [Language question in Tatarstan]*. "Tatcentr." Accessed November 10, 2020. https://tatcenter.ru/stories/yazykovoj-vopros-v-tatarstane/.

20 By cultural discourses from "central Russia," I mean those originating in Moscow (and sometimes St. Petersburg) and spreading across the country within the centralized media landscape of the Russian Federation.

21 Prilepin, Zakhar. *Post in support of the series and Yakhina*. "Facebook." Accessed November 22, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/zaharprilepin/posts/3102603613117272. *Prilepin: roman "Zuleikha otkrivayet glaza" rekomenduyu vsem! [Prilepin: I recommend the novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" to everyone!]*. "NSN." Accessed October 11, 2020. https://nsn.fm/culture/culture-prilepin-roman-zuleykha-otkryvaet-glaza-rekomenduyu-vsem.

22 Semeshkina, Yanita. *Zuleikha, otkroy nashi glaza* [Zuleikha, open our eyes]. "Russkiy Pioner." Accessed July 6, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/spetsarchive/m/single/45/single/_job/27582.

23 Yuzefovich, Galina. *Sledy Na Vode, Zuleikha i Zavidnoye Chustvo Very Steninoy* [Footprints on the water, Zuleikha and Vera Stenina's Enviable Feeling].* "Meduza." Accessed October 29, 2020. https://meduza.io/feature/2015/05/29/sledy-na-vode-zuleyha-i-zavidnoe-chuvstvo-very-steninoy.

24 Aristova, Olga. *Lichnoye mnenie: "Zuleikha Otkrivayet Glaza" Guzel' Yakhinoy* [Personal Opinion: "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina].* "Kot Brodskogo." Accessed December 20, 2020. https://kotbrodskogo.ru/articles/post/104-lichnoe-mnenie-zuleyha; Chernikova, Liudmila. *Retsenziya na roman Guzel' Yakhinoy "Zulikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [Review of Guzel Yakhina's Novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes"]. "Pishi-Chitay." Accessed February 10, 2021. http://write-read.ru/reviews/4874; Kotyosov, Aleksandr. *Retsenziza na roman Zakhinoy "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [Rewiev of the Novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Yakhina].

ity and related it to the fact that *Zuleikha* was an example of "women's literature." At the same time, they praised the book for depicting "the weak and strong woman,"[25] powerful emotions[26] and the great love story of the "Tatar Cinderella."[27]

[23] Some reviews from the "center" were critical of the book. For the literary critic Valeria Pustovaya (2016), the simplicity of the language and plot was reminiscent of Soviet novels. She, as well as other authors,[28] described *Zuleikha*'s success as a political project, since the way the book engages with the topic of Stalin's repressions matches the narrative promoted by the state: they are "fictionalized, mythologized and [turned] into mass entertainment."[29] Yakhina's second book, *Deti Moi* (*My Children*), was described as continuing the same project: "It tells a story of 'small' people having their moments of happiness in the times of Stalin's terror"[30] (Rudalev 2018). One of the reviewers, Kuz'menkov, believes that the positive reception of the book was a proof of the dependency of literary criticism on the market and the state[31].

[24] A few Russian critics also noticed that the relationship between Zuleikha and Ignatov is comparable to the one between Tatarstan and the Russian federal center[32]. However, this aspect was mostly noticed by Tatars, who criticized the book a lot more. The critics not only treated *Zuleikha* as an attempt to obscure the cruelty of GULAG and capitalize on the topic of Stalinism, but were also aware of the problematic colonial implications of the novel. For

"Druzhba Narodov." Accessed October 10, 2020. https://proza.ru/2015/10/27/2066; Medvedeva, Yuliya. *Professor Leybe Otkrivayet Glaza* [Professor Leybe Opens His Eyes]. "Blog Yulii Medvedevoy." Accessed October 11, 2020. http://medved.tilda.ws/zuleiha; Sklyar, Anna. *Guzel' Yakhina - Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza* [Guzel Yakhina - Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes].* "Schyastie Est'!" Accessed April 25, 2020. https://anchiktigra.livejournal.com/2043938.html; Taran, Tatyana. *Luybov v ekstremalnykh usloviyakh* [Love in extreme circumstances]. "MD Experiment." Accessed January 12, 2021. http://md-eksperiment.org/post/20180109-lyubov-v-ekstremalnyh-usloviyah; Zanegina, Asya. *"Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza": bolshaya istoriya o malen'koy zhenschine, pokorivshaya chitateley po vsemu miru* ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes": a big story about a little woman that has conquered readers all over the world." "Foma." Accessed October 18, 2020. https://foma.ru/zuleyha-otkryivaet-glaza-bolshaya-kniga-o-malenkoy-zhenshhine-pokorivshaya-chitateley-po-vsemu-miru.html.

25 Yudina, Olga. *Sila i slabost' zhenschiny v romane Guzel' Yakhinoy "Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza"* [Power and weakness of a woman in the novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina"]."Russkiy Pioner." Accessed July 20, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/project/m/single/45/single/_job/27856.

26 Matkovskiy, Sergey. *Otzyv na knigu Guzel' Yakhinoy "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [Response to the book "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina].* "Russkiy Pioner." Accessed November 12, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/profile/blogpost/9635/view/31693/.

27 *Chitatel'skaya konferentsiya po romanu Guzeli Yakhinoy "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [The Reader's Conference of Guzel Yakhina's Novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes." "Central Library of Nizhny Tagil." Accessed July 18, 2020. http://www.tagillib.ru/for/_profi/lib/_univer/detail.php?ID=34950.

28 Abasheva, Marina, and Vladimir Abashev. *Kniga kak simptom* [Book as a Symptom]. "Novy Mir." Accessed May 7, 2021. https://magazines.gorky.media/novyi/_mi/2016/5/kniga-kak-simptom.html; Pankratov, Viktor. *"Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* Guzel' Yakhinoy [Guzel Yakhina's "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes"]. "Sygma." Accessed September 19, 2020. https://syg.ma//@vkpank/zulieikha-otkryvaiet-ghlaza-guziel-iakhinoi.

29 Shershneva, Tatiana. *"Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza": v zone komforta* ["Zuleikha opens her eyes": in the comfort zone]. "Russkiy Pioner." Accessed October 6, 2020. http://ruspioner.ru/spetsarchive/m/single/45/single/_job/27575.

30 Kolobrodov, Alexey. *Nemtsy Povozhya, Stalin i angliyskiy gazon* [Volga Germans, Stalin and the English lawn]. "Rara Avis." Accessed June 14, 2020. http://rara-rara.ru/menu-texts/nemcy/_povolzhya/_stalin/_i/_anglijskij/_gazon.

31 Bekkin, Renat. *Mokraya kuritsa tatarskoy literatury ili kogo predala Zuleikha?* [Wet hen of Tatar literature or whom did Zuleikha betray?]. "Sibirskie Ogni." Accessed July 20, 2020. http://www.sibogni.ru/content/mokraya-kurica-tatarskoy-literatury-ili-kogo-predala-zuleyha. Kuzmenkov, Alexandr. *Marsh Soglasnykh. Roman Guzel' Yakhinoy "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"* [March of the consilient. Guzel Yakhina's Nove; "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes"]. "Russian Interest." Accessed December 21, 2020. http://russianinterest.ru/content/marsh-soglasnyh-roman-guzel-yahinoy-zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza.

32 Iudkevich, Marina. *Uyutnyi GULAG ili novyi vzlet Tatarstana* [Cozy GULAG and Tatarstan's new takeoff]. "Idel.Realii." Accessed September 17, 2020. https://www.idelreal.org/a/29494377.html.

them, the story of the death of Zuleikha's husband Murtaza and the change of her son's name was an attempt to praise the erasure of the Tatar nation. Project director at the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Russia, Nuriya Fatykhova, wrote that this storyline in the book is especially problematic as it "ignores the traumas of Stalin's language politics, when millions of people turned into 'natsmen' and were made to use Russian names instead of their own."[33] Many found the usage of the term "red horde" to describe communists as problematic, since the "horde" refers to the Golden Horde to which Tatars trace their lineage[34]. Critics were also angry with Yakhina's one-sided description of the Tatar household as well as with the inconsistencies in the plot[35]: Zuleikha mixed up Tatar words, presented knowledge of historical facts and myths that did not match her seemingly 'dark' rural upbringing, and performed rituals prohibited by Islam.

Of course, not all reviews from Tatarstan were negative. Some forgave Yakhina these "minor inconsistencies," as she represented the republic on the country-wide and even on the global level[36]. However, a significant number of reviews by Tatars as well as by Kazakhs[37] problematized the way the book depicted the Soviet project of modernization. There was even more critique once the production of the book-based series started. The series was created by the main state-affiliated channel and starred Chulpan Khamatova, a controversial figure who had long left Tatarstan, converted to Orthodox Christianity and is often supportive of the actions of Kremlin. While in the 'center' the series was received well[38], in Tatarstan local actors even refused to participate in the casting for the project[39]—largely due to the presence of Khamatova in it. After the series was launched, the actress reported receiving insults[40] and [25]

33 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm.
Natsmen, natsmenka, natsionalka—words used to dicscribe non-Russian inhabitants of the USSR.

34 Achmetzyanov, Salavat. *Zachem Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza: retsenziya potomka tatar, soslannykh na stroitel'stvo Magnitki* [What Does Zuleikha Open Her Eyes for: a Review by a Descendant of Tatars Who Were Exiled to Build Magnitka]. "Realnoe Vremya." Accessed March 12, 2021. https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/58767-recenziya-potomka-tatar-soslannyh-na-stroitelstvo-magnitki.

35 Achmetzyanov, Salavat. *Zachem Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza: retsenziya potomka tatar, soslannykh na stroitel'stvo Magnitki* [What Does Zuleikha Open Her Eyes for: a Review by a Descendant of Tatars Who Were Exiled to Build Magnitka]. "Realnoe Vremya." Accessed March 12, 2021. https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/58767-recenziya-potomka-tatar-soslannyh-na-stroitelstvo-magnitki; Batulla, Rabit. *Chto uvidela Zuleikha, kogda otkrila glaza?* [What did Zuleikha see when she opened her eyes?]. "Kazanskiye Vedomosti." Accessed January 15, 2021. https://kazved.ru/news/chto-uvidela-zuleyha-kogda-otkryla-glaza; Habutdinova, Mileusha. *Esli posmotret' v glaza Zuleikhe…* [If one looks into Zuleikha's eyes…].* "Kaleb." Accessed December 20, 2020. http://kalebtatar.ru/article/2813.

36 Muhametrahivov, Alfred. *"Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza" po-tatrski: "Eto ne prezentatsiya perevoda, a vecher zavisti"* ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" in Tatar: "It is not a presentation of the translation, but an evening of jealousy." "Business Gazeta." Accessed May 30, 2020. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/312468; Zaripov, Rustem. *Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza ili Guzel' - eto Prekrasnoye* [Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes or Guzel Means Beautiful]. "Zvezda Povolzhya." Accessed June 20, 2020. http://rustemzaripov.blogspot.com/2015/12/blog-post.html.

37 Naurzbaeva, Zira. *"Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza": roman o modernizatsii?* ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes": a novel about modernisation?]. "Express K." Accessed September 14, 2020. https://express-k.kz/news/kultura/_expert/zuleykha/_otkryvaet/_glaza/_roman/_o/_modernizatsii-107955.

38 Koryakin, Oleg. *Barrikady na Universitetskoy* [Barricades on Universiteskaya]. "Rossiyskaya Gazeta." Accessed October 11, 2020. https://rg.ru/2018/10/11/reg-pfo/v-centre-kazani-sniali-epizod-filma-zulejha-otkryvaet-glaza.html.

39 Mukhametova, Ruzilya. *Pochemu nekotorye tatarskiye artisty otkazalis' snimatsya v seriale "Zuleikha Otkrivaet Glaza"?* [Why did some Tatar artists refuse to appear in the TV series "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes"?]. "Sobytiya." Accessed October 11, 2020. https://sntat.ru/news/culture/03-11-2018/pochemu-nekotorye-tatarskie-artisty-otkazalis-snimatsya-v-seriale-zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-5643258.

40 *Chulpan Khamatova soobschila ob oskorbleniyakh iz-za seriala o raskulachivanii* [Chulpan Khamatova reported insults due to the series about dispossession]. "RBC Daily." Accessed November 16, 2020. https://www.rbc.ru/society/16/04/2020/5e984d7d9a7947dec34eb4e1.

gave a major interview to a liberal media outlet where she called her critics "barbarians."[41] The series was also criticized by Muslim clerics in Russia, who demanded an apology for the fact that many of the Tatar prisoners in the GULAG had the "names of historical and current Muftis of Russia"[42].

[26] The criticisms from Tatarstan were invalidated by most of the media in the 'center,' including *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the most important media outlets of the "democratic opposition."[43] The director of the series said that the book, together with the aforementioned Zakhar Prilepin's *Abode,* is a "milestone" in that it "looks at our history from a completely different perspective":

> [27] Because before it was always a discussion of who was right and who was wrong — white or red, Bolsheviks or kulaks, Russians or Tatars, for example. Certain oppositions. And here is a story about something else. Yes, there was a great historical disaster. […] How do people live in such a situation? What are they doing?[44]

[28] Continuing this argument, the producer of the series said that they expected a negative reaction from "communists, fundamentalists in Tatarstan and a whole bunch of other people who deny the fact of forced dispossession."[45] Art critic Andrey Erofeev expressed a similar idea:

> [29] Either they have already forgotten how to open their eyes, or propaganda gouged them out. Look, these are all fundamentalists – the ones who line up against this film. This is such barrack fundamentalist communism, Islamic fundamentalism – these are the people who invent a god for themselves: either Stalin or an Islamic god.[46]

[30] This position, which equalizes Stalinism with adherence to Islam and associates any demonstrations of non-Russian ethnic identity with fundamentalism, is representative of the discourse of many 'liberals' in Russia. Not only the supporter of the war in Ukraine Zakhar Prilepin[47] and islamophobic journalist Anastasia Mironova (who said that she lived with Tatars "and it is all true")[48] celebrated the book, but also such important representatives of the

41 Khamatova, Chulpan. *"Nevezhestvo vsegda peremeshano s varvarstvom i agressiei"* ["Ignorance is always mixed with barbarity and aggression"]. "Novaya Gazeta." Accessed November 4, 2020. https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/17/84946-chulpan-hamatova-nevezhestvo-vsegda-peremesheno-s-varvarstvom-i-agressiey.

42 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm.

43 Maluykova, Larisa. *Vremenno Svobodnye* [Temporary Liberated]. "Novaya Gazeta." Accessed October 13, 2020. https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/04/84704-vremenno-svobodnye.

44 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel' Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. "Radio Svoboda." Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcbtlZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk.

45 *Zuleikha otkrivayet ne tol'ko glaza, no i dveri* [Zuleikha opens not only eyes, but doors]. "Biznes Onlain." Accessed May 18, 2020. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/382595.

46 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel' Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. "Radio Svoboda." Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcbtlZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk.

47 *Prilepin: roman "Zuleikha otkrivayet glaza" rekomenduyu vsem!* [Prilepin: I recommend the novel "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" to everyone!]. "NSN." Accessed October 11, 2020. https://nsn.fm/culture/culture-prilepin-roman-zuleykha-otkryvaet-glaza-rekomenduyu-vsem.

48 Post by Mironova was deleted: https://www.facebook.com/ns.mironowa/posts/3702538489821466.

Russian opposition as singer Andrey Makarevich[49] or journalist and writer Sergey Medvedev. The latter said in an interview that those Tatars who criticize the series try to create a myth about "happy wealthy peasants," while in fact both Tatar and Russian villages were equally patriarchal.[50] This idea seems to echo the approach of Etkind's *Internal Colonization* (2003), in which all peasants in Russia were similarly oppressed regardless of other aspects of their identity.

In the 'West,' the colonial aspect of the book was also not noticed. As Danielle Ross remarked, this exemplified the general behavior of 'Western' critics who are "crowning non-European authors 'the voice of their people' on the basis that their books are available in European languages and distributed through major international presses,"[51] thus silencing the actual diversity of indigenous voices. Zuleikha was positively received by *New York Times* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*[52]. A reviewer from France called the appearance of the novel "the return of great Russian literature"[53]. The presentations of the book in Germany happened on state-affiliated platforms such as "Russian House of Science and Culture" in Berlin.[54] This suggests that Russia has invested some effort into promoting Yakhina abroad. An article from one of these presentations describes a meeting of Yakhina with her readers in Munich. A quote by one of the visitors reflects the dominant ignorance of the erasure and homogenization of non-Russian peoples of the former USSR: [31]

> Until now I always mixed up Tatars with those Kazakhs… [a neighbor enters the conversation] Well, because both these and those dance with sables. And after this meeting I won't mix them up anymore…[55] [32]

Even more surprising was the reaction of the British critic of Uzbek origin Hamid Ismailov, [33]

49 Makarevich, Andrey. *Chto zhe za von' podnyalas' vokrug fil'ma?* [What kind of stench has gone up around the movie?]. "Ekho Moskvy." Accessed November 12, 2020. https://echo.msk.ru/blog/a/_makarevich/2628384-echo/.

50 Medvedev, Sergey, Guzel' Yakhina, et. al. *Obizhennye Zuleikhoy* [Offended by Zuleikha]. "Radio Svoboda." Accessed April 30, 2020. https://www.svoboda.org/a/30568741.html?fbclid=IwAR2YOgm-2YZ6ePuSVcbtlZAnSoCZqzc38n-7tifeBLaQOUkVE3slVyVLqtk.

51 Ross, Danielle. *Back to Stalinism and its tropes? Islam and Europe in Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*. OEAW. Accessed April 24, 2022. https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/back-to-stalinism-and-its-tropes-islam-and-europe-in-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes?fbclid=IwAR2rGYxny3oXWZqcoz8a6vEyszVufwUKFK6gwsnKcNEsdA/_W1a/_h/_WTHGkE.

52 Holm, Kerstin. *Angst vor der eigenen Geschichte* [The fear of one's own history]. "Frankfurter Allgemeine." Accessed August 25, 2020. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/streit-um-serie-suleika-oeffnet-die-augen-16738944.html; Prose, Francine. *Exiled to Siberia: A First Novel Revisits Stalin's Great Purge*. "New York Times." Accessed October 22, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/books/review/guzel-yakhina-zuleikha.html; Shihatova, Rusina. *"V eto godu vo Frantsii zagovorili o vozvraschenii velikoy russkoy literatury"* ["This year in France they started talking about the return of the great Russian literature"]. "Les Media." Accessed December 20, 2020. https://les.media/articles/495461-v-etom-godu-vo-frantsii-zagovorili-o-vozvrashchenii-velikoy-russkoy-literatury.

53 Shihatova, Rusina. *"V eto godu vo Frantsii zagovorili o vozvraschenii velikoy russkoy literatury"* ["This year in France they started talking about the return of the great Russian literature"]. "Les Media." Accessed December 20, 2020. https://les.media/articles/495461-v-etom-godu-vo-frantsii-zagovorili-o-vozvrashchenii-velikoy-russkoy-literatury.

54 Usmanova, Chulpan. *Guzel' Yakhina v Germanii: vecher v Berline i uchastiye vo Frankfurtskoy yarmarke* [Guzel Yakhina in Germany: evening in Berlin and participation in the Frankfurt fair]. "Русское Поле." Accessed October 10, 2020. http://russkoepole.de/ru/rubriki/kultura/98-2009-11-26-20-00-40/4097-guzel-yakhina-v-germanii.html; *Literaturnyi vecher Guzel' Yakhinoy v Russkom Dome v Berline 10 yanvarya 2020* [Guzel Yakhina Literary Evening at the Russian House in Berlin January 10, 2020]. "DG Berlin." Accessed November 1, 2020. https://dg-berlin.eu/afisha/gusel-jachina-10-01-2020/.

55 Niberlein, Svetlana. *"Ya ne povtoryayu opyt zhenskikh sudeb svoey sem'iy"* ["I don't repeat the female fates in my family"]. "Idel. Realii." Accessed May 22, 2020. https://www.idelreal.org/a/29019136.html.

who proposed to compare Yakhina to British postcolonial writers Naipaul, Walcott, Rushdie, Achebe and Thiong'o (2016). It is impossible to say this about a book that keeps on "presenting the Russian protagonist as the universal subject" (Anisimova 2017, 3), thus remaining "true to the tradition of literary Orientalism."[56] In her justification and even glorification of the Soviet modernization of "backward" nations, Yakhina can be compared to such Soviet "national" writers as Yuri Ryhteu and Fazil Iskander, whom "Moscow was praising as a part of the project of total Russification of non-Russian peoples."[57] Just as the USSR promoted "national cultural figures by bringing them into the center" (Anisimova 2017, 4), contemporary Russia uses the seemingly Tatar *Zuleikha* to justify its imperialism. The fact that the works of "ethnically diverse writers from the Caucasus and Central Asia, such as Andrei Volos, a Russian writer from Tajikistan, the Dagestani writer Alisa Ganieva, and the Chechen writer German Sadulaev" (Anisimova 2017, 16) have never gained such success as *Zuleikha* also proves the conformist nature of the book.

The reviews that look over a decolonial analysis of the book also exist. Some examples [34]
are a short blog post by Danielle Ross[58], who in the end appeals to the 'Western' scholars who praise anything non-Russian without spending enough time on thorough analysis of the local situation, as well as an article by Nuriya Fatykhova[59], who focuses on the critique of the Russian liberals. Both articles briefly mention, but do not discuss in detail, the facet of the book which requires more elaboration: the gender aspect of *Zuleikha.* The next chapter looks at the book from an intersectional feminist perspective as a necessary alternative to the positions of the critics from the 'center.'

From Darkness to Light: The Making of a Soviet Woman

As one reviewer observed, *Zuleikha* is a story of "unveiling of the woman of the Orient."[60] [35]
Yakhina confirmed that this narrative was central to her book:

> The plot is about a worldview based on mythology. A Tatar peasant called Zuleikha [36]
> lives in an isolated, dark world, which combines faith in Allah, stories about brownies and spirits and the patriarchy. If not for the circumstances that force her to enter the modern world, she would have gone on to live in what was essentially the Middle Ages.[61]

56 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm.
Natsmen, natsmenka, natsionalka—words used to dicscribe non-Russian inhabitants of the USSR.

57 Bekkin, Renat. *Mokraya kuritsa tatarskoy literatury ili kogo predala Zuleikha?* [Wet hen of Tatar literature or whom did Zuleikha betray?]. "Sibirskie Ogni." Accessed July 20, 2020. http://www.sibogni.ru/content/mokraya-kurica-tatarskoy-literatury-ili-kogo-predala-zuleyha.

58 Ross, Danielle. *Back to Stalinism and its tropes? Islam and Europe in Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*. OEAW. Accessed April 24, 2022. https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/back-to-stalinism-and-its-tropes-islam-and-europe-in-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes?fbclid=IwAR2rGYxny3oXWZqcoz8a6vEyszVufwUKFK6gwsnKcNEsdA/_W1a/_h/_WTHGkE.

59 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm.

60 Babitskaya, Varvara. *"Zuleikha otkrivaet glaza" Guzel' Yakhinoy: spetsposeleniye kak spaseniye* ["Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina: special settlement as salvation]. "Afisha Daily." Accessed June 20, 2020. https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/vozduh/books/zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-guzel-yahinoy-specposelenie-kak-spasenie/.

61 Original translation. *Guzeva, Alexandra. Zuleikha kaka semeynaya istoriya Yakhinoy* [Zuleikha as Yakhina's family history]. "God Literatury." Accessed April 25, 2020. https://godliteratury.ru/projects/zuleykha-kak-semeynaya-istoriya-yakhinoy.

In this quote we see a colonial fusion of space and time—while Tatarstan represents "the Middle Ages," the exile of Zuleikha in Siberia is part of "the modern world." Having been forcefully deported by the Soviets, Zuleikha forgets her dead Tatar husband and falls in love with the Russian man who killed him. Collectivization and exile for her turn into a journey from an "enslaved woman of the Orient" to an emancipated 'Western' subject—economically independent and sexually open. This is how the author describes the development of Zuleikha: [37]

> The story is about overcoming mythological consciousness. Zuleikha lives in a closed, rather gloomy, but understandable world […] and suddenly becomes torn out of her surroundings, so to say, transferred from the past to the present…[62] [38]

Here again Yakhina expresses a colonial understanding of space and time, in which certain locales are positioned at the forefront of the linear axis of progress while other places, like Tatarstan, have to forever catch up. The "progress" her heroine goes through is the process of the erasure of her Tatar background: [39]

> At first, she is a downtrodden peasant woman who lives in her own world – in the beginning there is a lot of Tatar 'colorite' – then it gradually disappears and in the end is completely absent, because Zuleikha has changed and her worldview as well. She begins to speak Russian, as there are only Russians around her. She starts to love a Russian man, she gives birth to her son, Yusuf, who most of the time speaks Russian.[63] [40]

Interestingly, Yakhina does not call the culture that Zuleikha adapts "Soviet"—it is described as "Russian." Thus, the author unconsciously confirms the colonial nature of the USSR. However, in another interview Yakhina contradicts herself, calling the Soviet project "multinational:" [41]

> I wanted something national to transform into something multinational. The novel is not about a Tatar woman, but women in general. Not about a Russian man, but about men in general.[64] [42]

The book shows us how coloniality is intertwined with and works through gender. As Slezkine (2017) writes, in all colonial projects the relationship towards women was one of the key elements through which the difference of "civilized" and "barbaric" peoples was constructed. The USSR also shared this approach. Though a big role in the imposition of new authority was given to fighting the practices that oppressed all women, the policies differed in 'Russian' and non-'Russian' regions. An ethnic minority woman was called *natsionalka*, *natsmenka* (national minority woman) and *vostochnitsa* (woman of the Orient), "indicating the particular importance of the cross-section of gender and national identity" (Gradskova 2019, [43]

62 Ivanycheva, Olga. *Guzel' Yakhina: "Mne ne hotelos' by sorevnovaniya s soboy"* [Guzel Yakhina: "I would not want a competition with myself"]. "Lit-ra.info." Accessed March 12, 2020. https://lit-ra.info/intervyu/guzel-yakhina-mne-ne-khotelos-by-sorevnovatsya-s-soboy/.

63 Sharafiev, Ilnur. *Guzel' Yakhina: "U menya est' chetkoe otnoshenie k figure Stalina i periody ego pravleniya"* [Guzel Yakhina: "I have a clear attitude to the figure of Stalin and the period of his reign"].* "Biznes Onlain." Accessed November 15, 2020. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/144322.

64 Mikhailova, Natalya. *Guzel' Yakhina: "Ko mne uzhe obraschayutsya – Zuleikha"* [Guzel Yakhina: "They already address me with Zuleykha"]. "Ulpressa." Accessed January 12, 2021. https://ulpressa.ru/2017/01/11/guzel-yahina-ko-mne-uzhe-obrashhayutsya-zuleyha/.

5). Saying that the book is about women "in general," Yakhina tries to erase this intersection. However, it is impossible not to see it knowing that "emancipation of the woman of the Orient" became a crucial component of achieving the "victory over backwardness" and "freedom for dominated nationalities" (Gradskova 2019, 2) brought by "the Soviet 'emancipators' mainly marked by their Russian and Christian Orthodox origin" (Gradskova 2019, 15).

[44] "Dissertations, books, and articles on the Soviet emancipation of *natsionalka* used to stress the leading role of the Communist Party, and remarks expressing the gratitude of the "emancipated" were also frequent" (Gradskova 2019, 8). This denied the earlier achievements of local women who advocated for equality from an Islamic perspective. According to Gradskova, Muslim intellectuals from the Volga-Ural region were active and included in the global discussions on the future of Muslim nations in the beginning of the twentieth century (Gradskova 2019, 16). One of the most important debates was about gender equality and "the right to education for girls and women" (Gradskova 2019, 38):

> [45] In the situation of growing Russification […] along with the general radicalization of the situation in Russia, the connections between woman's education, women's rights, and the future progress of the nation were brought up by the Muslim politicians more frequently. (Gradskova 2019, 42)

[46] In 1911, a Tatar women's rights activist, Mukhlisa Bubi, opened a school for preparing Muslim women to be teachers, which the Russian authorities later closed down, believing "that giving Muslim girls a modern education represented a danger to the imperial politics in the region" (Gradskova 2019, 42). "The discussions on self-determination, modernization and solutions to the woman's question became radicalized in the Volga-Ural region in 1917" (Gradskova 2019, 51). Magazines for women "discussed the importance of progress and education and informed readers about new educational initiatives for women" (Gradskova 2019, 51); The First Muslim Women's Congress was organized in Kazan, which "referred to Muslim law, to sharia, in order to claim women's equal rights with men's" (Gradskova 2019, 52). The Soviet state erased the memory of this event, which was described as "attended mainly by the 'bourgeois intelligentsia' " (Gradskova 2019, 75). Similarly erased were all women who were actively trying to change the policies of Czarist Russia and often took part in the early Soviet reforms (Schurko 2016).

[47] The activists who did not lose their identities but devoted their lives to fighting for women's rights from a national and Muslim perspective, like Mukhlisa Bubi, "experienced mass arrests, death and, often, total erasure from the official Soviet history documents" (Gradskova 2019, 62). The erasure of local activists from the history of emancipation "was an important condition for unlimited and unchallengeable reproduction of the Soviet narrative on Bolshevik emancipation of the 'backward' natsionalka" (Gradskova 2019, 62). Women of 'national minorities' internalized this discourse:

> [48] The Tatar historian Alta Makhmutova remembered that while she was a PhD student in history in the late 1960s she could not believe that in the 1910s the Tatars could have considered the education of women to be very important and that they had created a special Muslim high school for Tatar girls. (Gradskova 2019, 3)

[49] As Gradskova notes, all actors advocating for gender equality, "imperial officers and enlighteners, Muslim intellectuals, and some orientologists," approached it "through the lens of the

developmental paradigm" (Gradskova 2019, 44). However, Muslim reformism, jadidism, differed from both the approach of the "imperial enlighteners" and the Soviet "civilizing projects for inorodtsy women:" While the latter saw this as a way to assimilate or diminish the influence of Islam on the non-Russian population, Muslim intellectuals saw improvement of the situation for women as the condition for "progress of the nation" and resistance against Russification and Christianization" (Gradskova 2019, 44). While Jadids uplifted Muslim women, the Soviet authorities, "closely following European Orientalist scripts, […] described [them] as subordinate, practically reducing them to slaves" (Gradskova 2019, 73).

> The pamphlet on Tatar women, for example, stated: 'Similar to other Muslim nations, the Tatar woman is deprived of many freedoms, social life and the possibility of obtaining an education or having independent work is totally closed to her.' (Gradskova 2019, 73–74) [50]

As we see, Yakhina repeats this narrative when describing the life of Zuleikha in Tatarstan. [51] The Bolshevik approach to Tatar women positioned them as oppressed mostly due to Islam, which Gradskova describes as "the common feature of European civilization discourse of the time" (Gradskova 2019, 74). The same discourse is present today, according to Uzarashvili (2021): Islamophobia, a new kind of racism, is hitting women especially hard. Omel'chenko and Sabirova confirm this thought:

> The gender question – or more strictly the positioning of women with regard to men within the Islamic community – is a central tenet of both popular and academic thinking about Islam. For some, images of the 'veil', shariat divorce laws, polygyny and the confinement of women are symbols of a harsh and restrictive regime. (Omel'chenko, Pilkington, et al. 2003, 242) [52]

Omel'chenko and Sabirova believe that "Russian sociological literature" has failed "to explore fully the intersection of gender and Islam in Russia" (2003, 242). Their own research has demonstrated that there is a "rising interest in Islamic gender norms as the Tatar population seeks to express its national identity" (2003, 242). According to their study, "notions of being a Muslim woman in Tatarstan consisted primarily in their differentiation from the Russian 'other' in terms of perceived moral 'standards' as well as domestic practices, with little evidence of any real impact of the idealized 'Muslim woman' on everyday gender relations" (2003, 245). As Omel'chenko and Sabirova note, actual gender practices in Tatarstan continue "to borrow heavily from 'Western' models of relations between men and women" (2003, 242). Nevertheless, the Russian media demonizes the "revival of religion (first of all Islam) and the growing importance of the local national traditions and customs [by portraying them] as preventing women from fully exercising their rights" (Gradskova 2019, 4). Zuleikha fits well into this narrative, contrasting Islam and Soviet atheist emancipation. This kind of binary has long been criticized by 'third world' feminists, post- and decolonial feminists and feminists of color as an example of "white saviorism" (Zakaria 2021). [53]

In the interviews, Yakhina denied any connection of the book to feminism, as well as the necessity of feminism in general—she perceived it as irrelevant in contemporary Russia, because in "Russia, women have been emancipated for a long time."[65] However, in fact her book [54]

65 Lomykina, Natalia. *Vse, chto vam stoit znat' o Guzel' Zakhinoy* [All you need to know about Guzel Yakhina]. "GQ." Accessed October 15, 2020. https://www.gq.ru/success/guzel-yahina.

repeats the rhetoric of some Russian feminists who blame discrimination of women in Muslim regions on Islam and not on the local histories of colonialism and inequality (Solovey 2019). A different position is expressed by Islamic feminism, a line of thought developed in the 1990s by such scholars as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud (Seedat 2013, 26) to prove that Islam is compatible with demands for equality between men and women (Anwar 2018, 7). In Russia, Islamic feminism is represented by, for instance, Natalia Tambieva, the Chief of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in St. Peterburg, or Liaisian Shafigullina, who studies women's organizing in Tatarstan in the twentieth century and today at Kazan Federal University. Islamic feminism demonstrates that feminism "is the product neither of the East and the West nor of the religious and the secular, but a combination of both" (Anwar 2018, 7). It also shows that it is not necessary to conform to the narrative of *Zuleikha's* inevitable secularization and Russification for the sake of 'progress.'

In her article, Fatykhova mentions a play by Gayaz Iskhaqi which, she believes, Yakhina [55]
referred to when writing her book. This play, written in the 1910s to commemorate the Christianisation of Volga Tatars in the nineteenth century, presents a Tatar woman who is forced to marry a Russian man, declared Christian and made to change her name. Unable to cope with this, she attempts to commit suicide. This play was prohibited in the USSR and has still not regained its popularity in the conditions of Russian (neo-)colonialism[66]. In comparison to Iskhaqi's *Zuleikha*, as well as to the "Qūl ʿAli's *Yūsuf kitābı* (The Book of Joseph) mentioned by Ross,[67] *Zuleikha* of Yakhina portrays the 'Sovietization' and 'Russification' of Tatar women as beneficial for them. As Gradskova has demonstrated:

> The realization of the Soviet emancipation of natsionalka from the imperial center, [56]
> together with silence and the extermination of the ideas and supporters of all the other projects, converted the Soviet emancipation into one more project of imperial domination. (Gradskova 2019, 190–91)

Zuleikha, by supporting this imperial narrative, fits well into the politics of contemporary [57]
Russia, which are grounded in the imperialism of both Czarist Russia and the USSR. These politics require criticism, which, as this article has shown, does not come from the liberal intellectual elites. However, there is a segment of Russian society which has long been reflexive of it—namely decolonial feminists, who are also mentioned in the conclusion of this article.

Conclusion: Decolonial Futures

This article attempted to demonstrate that the book *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (Yakhina 2015) [58]
supports Russian (neo-)colonialism and (neo-)imperialism. The contemporary Russian state, in an attempt to maintain and enlarge its territory, is aggressively violating the territorial integrity of other counties and at the same time tries to erase its own inner coloniality. In relation to Tatarstan, this means presenting its "historical experience and present religious situation […] as an emulable embodiment of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional harmony" (Khurmatullin 2010, 103). The image of the harmonious "coexistence of Russians and Tatars"

66 Fatykhova, Nuriya. *Zuleikha protiv Zuleikhi* [Zuleikha against Zuleikha]. "Colta." Accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/24311-spory-o-zuleyhe-i-sovetskiy-imperializm.

67 Ross, Danielle. *Back to Stalinism and its tropes? Islam and Europe in Zuleikha Opens her Eyes*. OEAW. Accessed April 24, 2022. https://www.oeaw.ac.at/sice/sice-blog/back-to-stalinism-and-its-tropes-islam-and-europe-in-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes?fbclid=IwAR2rGYxny3oXWZqcoz8a6vEyszVufwUKFK6gwsnKcNEsdA/_W1a/_h/_WTHGkE.

(Omel'chenko, Pilkington, et al. 2003, 274) is strengthened by such cultural projects as the podcast *Brief history of Tatars*[68] sponsored by the *Tatneft* corporation with Chulpan Khamatova, who played the main role in the *Zuleikha* series. In the podcast, she cites Yakhina and claims that Russians and Tatars historically cannot exist without each other. Both the book and the series present Soviet colonialism and the erasure of national and religious subjectivity as a universal formula of emancipation.

[59] The ideology of the Russian Federation and its attitude towards national minorities, their languages and cultures, is a continuation of the colonialism of Russian Empire and the USSR. Russia's aggressive imperialist expansionism, which in 2022 culminated in a full-scale attack on Ukraine, coexists with the ignorance of the coloniality of Russian history by liberal public intellectuals. The fears about Russia's territorial integrity and the rise of ethnic nationalism are entangled with "the new collective anxieties of Russian society" (Anisimova 2017, 2) connected with 'radical' Islam and 'Western' imperialism:

> [60] The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly reduced the formal territorial control exercised by Moscow, but the legacies of imperial expansion remain evident in the restive Muslim communities of the North Caucasus and in the large-scale migration of Central Asian Muslims into post-Soviet Russia. (Dannreuther 2010, 9)

[61] As Schmoller and Di Puppo write, "experts assume that by 2050 the Muslim share of the Russian population will amount to more than one third" (2018, 84). However, Russian intellectuals continue to promote "the so-called 'civilizational nationalism,' largely based on the primacy of Orthodox Christianity [and] concerned about the 'Islamic threat' " (Verkhovsky 2010, 31).

> [62] The "Islamic threat" is widely used for the justification of expansionist politics [in Syria or Central Asia], quite similarly to the use of "Pan-Islamism" in the past. At the same time, the Russian pro-government press openly criticizes European multiculturalism, and constantly reminds about the "Muslim threat" to European culture. (Gradskova 2019, 187)

[63] Any expression of the Tatar national consciousness by the liberal intellectuals is therefore labeled as religious extremism[69]. Their fears for the territorial integrity of contemporary Russia prove their complicity in its aggressive foreign policy as well as in the racist and colonial attitude towards its own citizens. As Gradskova writes, "the failure of democratic reforms and the economic crises in Russia made the narratives on the 'great Soviet past' attractive once again […] however, after 1991, 'generosity' and 'sacrifice' were attributed mainly not to the Bolshevik party, Lenin, or Stalin, but to the Russian people (*russki narod*)" (Gradskova 2019, 3–4). Russian liberals help to maintain the status quo when the country is portrayed as "above all the homeland of ethnic Russians" (Tolz 2017) and when they fail to see the problematic aspects of such cultural products as *Zuleikha*. In the same way, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine they keep denying that the main reason of the war is Russian and Soviet

68 *Kratkaya istoriya tatar* [Short history of Tatars]. "Arzamas." Accessed October 18, 2020. https://arzamas.academy/courses/65.

69 Ibid.

colonialism, not just "Putin's regime"[70]. In order to transform Russian society, other ideas must become more visible—those critical of the Russian and Soviet coloniality. These ideas have long been promoted by decolonial feminist activists. The unprecedented mobilization and enlargement of indigenous grassroots movements in Russia[71] in the aftermath of the war gives hope that their voices will become louder than those of liberal intellectuals, bringing closer the decolonization of Russia.

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70 Most of the public events that reflect on the collective responsibility of Russians in the war do not include non-Russian speakers and represent an imperialist view on the 'periphery' from the 'center.' For instance, Leonid Volkov, the member of the team of Alexey Navalny, straight after criticizing Putin, started to talk about his fears of Chechen separatism (see a post by a Chechen Telegram channel 1ADAT: https://t.me/IADAT/12658). Such attitudes can be traced back to the positions of the Soviet liberal intelligentsia (Djagalov 2021; Distributed Cognition Cooperative 2021).

71 After the invasion of Russia into Ukraine numerous new national movements have appeared (Buryats against War, Sakha against War etc.) and the existing ones became more visible.

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Early Twenty-First-Century Literary Images from the Margins of the Russian (Orthodox) World

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ABSTRACT The paper analyzes two artistic artefacts, one graphic reportage and one novel from and about post-Soviet Georgia, focusing on the problem of religious difference within Orthodox Christianity. In imperial history, the fact that Georgia is an Orthodox Christian country was employed by the Russian side to legitimate the Georgian Church's inclusion into the Russian ecclesiastic hierarchy and, what is more, of Georgia into the Russian empire. Georgian Orthodoxy was thus at least partly and in certain periods denied its religious autonomy. This parallels other strategic renouncements of differences from the Russian side, as for instance in the contemporary usage of the concept "Russian World" that combines the claim of "unity in faith" with language use and cultural consciousness into a mobilizing nationalist trope. The analysis of Viktoria Lomasko's travel feature about Georgia and of Lasha Bugadze's documentary novel "A Small Country" shows how contemporary artists and writers reassess the question of Georgia's religious heritage and its difference from the Russian religious heritage. Whereas Lomasko is critical of the Georgian Church's moral authority, she also gives ample room for presenting Georgian Orthdoxy's difference as advantageous with regard to the Russian Church. Bugadze, by contrast, scrutinizes the Georgian Church's fatal entanglement with the state that engendered both, nationalism and an uncanny allegiance with Russia.

KEYWORDS Russia, Georgia Orthodoxy, The Russian World, religious difference, artistic representation, gender

Introduction

Russia has a strained relationship with a number of its neighboring countries, among them Georgia, which was one of the first republics to declare independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.[1] Across this historical cleavage both countries are connected by an ambiguous religious commonality, based on their Orthodox Christian faith, that forms the background of both Georgian strivings for independence and Russia's contestation of its neighbor's difference, [1]

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expressing a hegemonic attitude, even legitimizing colonial aggression. This article delves into the contemporary cultural and religious aspect of this complex entanglement as present in two exemplary literary and graphic works, one from Russia, one from Georgia. It analyses how contemporary artists reflect on the Russian-Georgian interdependence in the religious realm and how they critically reassess the nationalist, colonialist and patriarchal constituents of this relationship. Both authors, albeit in different ways, reflect on the entanglement of their respective government and the Orthodox Church.

[2] One of the key questions against the backdrop of which this discussion unfolds is whether Orthodox Christianity is a unity under Russian guidance or a pluralistic union of equal yet diverse churches and believers. It is thus a peculiar case of religious contact that is under scrutiny here: some participants deny the rift altogether. Moreover, both countries' and their churches' relations are asymmetrical with regard to power, and yet they share values, ecclesiastical structures and theological dogmata. This situation evolved in a complex imperial context that I will outline at the outset in order to be able to elucidate the many ways in which it still governs modern artistic production.

Religious Differences in a Multiethnic Arena

[3] The Caucasus region is ethnically diverse and has for centuries been at the crossroads of religions, among which Islam and Christianity are the most globally visible. Yet we must be careful not to reduce the interreligious constellation into which Russian-Georgian relations are embedded to a blunt conflict of the Cross and the Half Moon, as the Russian imperial conquerors did (Layton 1994, 194). In the Caucasus, various Christian traditions coexist, the Muslim communities are in part Shiites, in part Sunnites, and the region is home to a once large Sephardic Jewish community. Moreover, the various religious groups' sacred spaces overlap and form a palimpsest with "pagan" local cults, producing a hybrid and highly complex spiritual topography (Darieva, Tuite, and Kevin 2018, 1–17). While in the Caucasus, religion has for centuries been a more important identity marker than other components of modern nationality, such as language and culture, certain cultural patterns are shared across religious divides (Manning 2012, 147–49)[2]. These are often also grounded on or refer to gender roles and therefore, as I will show, have a special significance in the cultural self-reflection of Georgians and other nationalities in the region as well as in their complicated relationship with Russia.

[4] It needs mention, though, that in a *longue durée* perspective the problem of religious difference or unity between Russia and Georgia became significant only relatively late, with the onset of Russian domination in the eighteenth century, hence "unity in faith," a concept explained below, resembles a colonialist trope designed to govern loyalties. Importantly, the complex network of other religious and ethnic relations, taken together with the integration into and disintegration from other empires, most importantly the Persian and Ottoman, predated the Russian-Georgian alliance and in many instances complicated it. Starting in the twentieth century, western European and U.S. American players entered the scene, bringing along a Western liberal discourse that too has left its mark on Georgian discussions about religion and gender.

[5] In the post-Soviet Caucasus, cultural processes of appropriation and delimitation—most, but

2 The mutual perception of Christian Georgians and Muslim Georgians in the late nineteenth century is a particular case in point; see Paul Manning (2012), 147–149.

not all of which include a Russian element—are still highly acute. Moscow-centered knowledge systems and their associated regimes of governing differences, also regarding religion, persist and still determine mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion of certain groups from political or ideological communities. If we understand decolonization with Madina Tlostanova (Tlostanova 2012, 133–34) as reflecting and ultimately overcoming (sometimes unconsciously reproduced) colonial or imperial knowledge systems as well as mental and cultural patterns that by means of ontological marginalization govern attitudes towards fellow citizens and neighboring countries, decolonizing Russia clearly is a task yet to be achieved. But my examples from both Russian and Georgian cultural reflection about the religious element in their uneven relationship shed light on an ongoing reconsideration of differences in the Orthodox community that can be considered steps into that direction, even if they are marginal and uncapable of opposing the Russian state's aggression. The first is the Russian graphic artist Viktoria Lomasko's travel feature on Georgia that was published in 2016. The other is the 2017 Georgian documentary novel *A Small Country* by Lasha Bugadze. I will show that Viktoria Lomasko questions the Russian hegemonic understanding of "unity in faith" and eventually deconstructs the associated concept of the "Russian World." Lasha Bugadze, by contrast, sees not so much "unity in faith" but rather complicity in power. He focuses on the eminent yet problematic significance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's society and shows its fatal involvement with the (Soviet and later independent Georgian) state that paradoxically results in a situation in which an attack on the (Georgian) Orthodox Church can be perceived as an attack on Russia.

Russia and Georgia—Orthodox Brothers

In the past decades, the Russian Orthodox Church has played an important role in forging a patriarchal state ideology and promoting ethnic nationalism in Russia and beyond, as manifest in its support of the concept of *Russkii mir*, to be translated as the Russian World or the Russian Peace (Bremer 2015). The contemporary concept of *Russkii mir* is an adaptation of a nineteenth-century Slavophile ideal: the local self-organization of Russian peasants, called *mir* or *obshchina,* that intellectuals like Aleksandr Gertsen considered a Russian indigenous form of socialism and an alternative to Western models of popular sovereignty and democratic representation (Gertsen 1858). Today the term is employed to refer to people who speak Russian and adhere to Russian cultural values (Laruelle 2015; Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019, 9–10; Caffee 2013, 22–24). It plays a key role in the nationalist legitimation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, claiming eastern Ukraine as Russian space. But moreover, the Russian World is to a large degree a religious concept, implying a belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church together with the respective Moscow-centered messianistic historical consciousness (Zabirko 2015, 114–16). Orthodoxy, language and historical belonging are presented as constituents of the Russian nation in an emphatic Herderian sense and are importantly not only found within Russia's confines but also beyond its borders, making Russians "one of the most numerable divided nations on earth", as leading Russian politicians have it (T.A.S.S. 2019). *Russkii mir* thus is a concept that negates Russia's inner multiplicity with regard to language, ethnicity and religion. But it denies difference more generally and also strategically, coupling religious identities with politics, expressing imperialist or at least hegemonic ambitions. [6]

While this concerns a number of former Soviet republics (Ukraine and Belarus, to name but [7]

two), Georgia is a particularly interesting case of clashing national and religious group constructions since Georgia clearly does not qualify for membership in the Russian nation with regard to language, culture or historical consciousness. But concerning Orthodoxy, it is affected by the Russian inclusive and homogenizing view on neighboring cultures, the concept employed for this being *edinoverie* (unity in faith), an emotionally charged Russian term that refers to Christian Orthodoxy, implicitly meaning Russian Orthodoxy, headed by the Russian patriarch. But Georgia, unlike Ukraine, for instance, historically did not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. Georgia was christianized long before the Eastern Slavs had even ethnically consolidated (in the fourth century AD) (Grdzelidze, George, and Vischer 2006, 20). Moreover, its religious difference is underscored by the fact that Georgia gained its ecclesiastic independence—autocephaly—from the ancient Antiochian patriarchy, not from Constantinople, as Russia did. In the Russian view, Georgian Orthodoxy never enjoyed the prestige of byzantine Greek Orthodoxy because it was the latter that for centuries functioned as Russia's "mother-church," the theological and administrative authority for the Russian Church. With the Tractate of Georgievsk (1783) that marked Georgia's inclusion into the Russian Empire, the Georgian Orthodox Church was successively incorporated into the Russian Synod.[3] In this process the ambiguity of the concept *edinoverie* (unity in faith) is significant. Underlining the meaning of the church Slavonic *edinyi* as "one and the same" or "one and only," *edinoverie* can be interpreted as the identity of Georgian and Russian Orthodoxy. However, the concept also allows for a pluralistic and inclusive understanding (White 2020, 1–22), like the no less contested Russian concept of *sobornost'* (collegiality) that locates religious truth in a collective that is not necessarily homogenous.

[8] In spite of the forced Russification (Von Lilienfeld 1993, 222–23) as well as dogmatic and (temporary) ecclesiastic unity, the Georgian Church's administration and religious traditions deviate from its Russian counterpart. Grdzelidze (2006, 114) stresses the absence of state interference in the Georgian Church, but differences also pertain to cultural forms in religious practice, most importantly the use of the Old Georgian language in liturgy instead of Church Slavonic, and gendered social behavior rules (Grdzelidze, George, and Vischer 2006, 114). Thus, Georgian Orthodoxy compared with Russian Orthodoxy is "almost the same, but not quite," to quote Homi Bhabha's (1994, 123) famous phrase. However, this similarity does not bring about aesthetic effects like colonial mimicry, let alone mockery, that would potentially lead to decolonization. The Georgian-Russian religious similarities or affinities that allow for differences are typical for decentralized Orthodox Christianity (Metreveli 2021, 20). They emerged prior to and outside of the imperial encounter, and only later both churches' unequal interaction became legitimized with "unity in faith" and alleged religious brotherhood (Chkhaidze 2018), while, as Susan Layton has shown, paradoxically the Russian Romantic cultural image of Georgia is one of an oriental, potentially Muslim female (1994, 191–211).

[9] The Russian policy of claiming the Georgians' faith to be identical and thus fully absorbable into Russian Orthodoxy was neither uninterrupted nor consistent. The Soviet Union was militantly atheist. Since the outbreak of World War II, and most palpably with Brezhnev's stagnation, however, the Soviet authorities showed a certain tolerance towards religion, including the Georgian Church as spiritual backbone (Grdzelidze, George, and Vischer 2006, 220–21). Religion was reinterpreted as national tradition or folklore and politically approved as morally uplifting (Dragadze 1988, 73), typically practiced by elderly females in the private sphere (Gurchiani 2021, 105). But this was also true for Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union,

3 For a detailed history of Georgian autocephaly, see Tamara Grdzelidze et al. (2006), 107 and 192–244.

and can be explained with the social position of aged women in the USSR who became virtuosos in the spiritual realm (Gurchiani 2021, 102) while their belief could conveniently be taken as a remnant from the past. Regarding popular religiosity, tolerance in Georgia was more pronounced than in Russia—in this case, the USSR's center-periphery relations brought about weaker pressure at the fringes, which among other factors can be explained with the established Soviet regime of governing nationalities. Even though the Bolsheviks' utopian aim was a classless, atheist, internationalist society, they considered national consolidation an indispensable if evil step on the path to communism and therefore tolerated certain expressions of nationality. Among them could be elements taken from religious culture, sublimated as expressions of popular spirit (Slezkine 1994, 424, 429). Thus the religious heritage withstood the socialist period and was charged with a conservative dissident tinge that attracted certain factions of the elites.

As a result, after the collapse of the USSR, the Orthodox Church became a powerful actor, successfully claiming to be the core and defender of the Georgian nation (Zviadadze 2021, 211–13), as post-Soviet Georgia suffered from deep economic crisis and several separatist wars as well as territorial losses, induced by Russia. In the social arena, however, both Churches, the Russian and Georgian, opposed emancipation, the right of abortion, non-heterosexual relations and other liberal political pursuits side by side. Particularly since the breaking off of diplomatic relations in 2008, both Churches try to mitigate their countries' political confrontations (Ifact 2020). [10]

Viktoria Lomasko's Georgian Travel Feature

Viktoria Lomasko is a prominent graphic artist. She started her career with graphic reportages (*graficheskii reportazh*), a genre which combines journalism with spontaneous, documentary drawings and is akin to documentary comics. Viktoria Lomasko's work of the 2000s was an integral part of the Russian artistic movement of social graphics (*sotsial'naia grafika*). Her specific genre evolved from her graphic documentation of court hearings in the trial against the curators of the 2004 art exhibition entitled "Watch Out: Religion!" (Осторожно, религия!). Christian Orthodox activists had violently attacked the exhibition for its alleged blasphemy and engendered one of the first religiously motivated trials in post-Soviet Russia, holding the liberal organizers of the exhibition responsible for hurting their religious feelings.[4] In court, photography and video-taping, perceived by many as media more suitable for objectively capturing reality, are prohibited, hence Viktoria Lomasko documented the trial hearings with her drawings, for which she was first welcomed and later harassed by Orthodox activists (Deutsche Welle 2013)[5]. Thus, right from the start, Lomasko dedicated her work to reflecting about the antiliberal turn Russian politics have taken since the early 2000s. Many of her drawings contain speech balloons and resemble comics. But she only occasionally arranges the pictures in sequences of frames, as comic authors usually do. The graphic elements in Lomasko's works are more often accompanied by captions and journalistic or documentary text, written after direct observation and sometimes interviews. Thus, Lomasko's graphic reportage complements the mass media's (missing or manipulative) coverage of politically controver- [11]

4 For a detailed report and analysis of the case, see Mikhail Ryklin (2007).

5 See Lomasko's interview with the German public radio station Deutsche Welle, published 21.02.2013, *DW*. "Viktoriia Lomasko: "Risunki uzhe sushchestvuiut, a mne ikh nado tol'ko proiavit'." [The drawings already exist, I just have to bring them to light]. Accessed April 14, 2021. https://www.dw.com/ru/виктория-ломаско-рисунки-уже-существуют-а-мне-их-надо-только-проявить/а-16617405.

sial events with hand-made, openly subjective drawings that are embedded in a recognizable setting and give the graphic artist the authority of a witness. When presenting her work, Lomasko explains her peculiar artistic form as a continuation of early Soviet reportage.[6] But her work also resonates with contemporary Western, particularly U.S. American documentaries and journalistic pieces in graphic form, which Rocco Versaci (Versaci 2008, 109–38) terms comic reportages and which he links to the by the early 2000s exhausted genre of new journalism that has metamorphosed into an artistically more credible, more individual form, "anti-'official' and anti-corporate" (Versaci 2008, 111). While graphic reportage gains its credibility by stressing its subjectivity (Versaci 2008, 116) and marginal status, its ostensibly hand-made outlook seemingly contradicts the means of its distribution: Viktoria Lomasko's work is brought to the audience via electronic media, mostly the internet and social media. Only in the West are Viktoria Lomasko's works palpably present beyond the electronic sphere: collected in printed book editions (2017 *Other Russias*, 2019 in German *Die Unsichtbaren und die Zornigen* and French *D'autres Russies*) and numerous exhibitions, for instance in Bochum, Manchester, London and Bale. She has frequently received fellowships as artist in residence and other honors.

[12] Viktoria Lomasko has repeatedly traveled to former Soviet republics, among them Georgia. During these journeys she was usually hosted by activists who organized creative workshops with Lomasko about the emancipation of women and minority rights issues. Afterwards, Viktoria Lomasko produced graphic features of these trips. Her Georgia feature is available online on colta.ru, where it was published in 2016.[7]

[13] Viktoria Lomasko is highly aware of the various traditions that inform her perception and representation of society. While, as mentioned above, she is artistically indebted to Soviet documentary drawing, she is one of the few Russian artists who publicly address the deeply rooted imperialism and racism in Russian society that permeates Russian images of Asian Soviet republics and other peripheries of the Soviet realm.[8] With her reductionist drawing style and selection of motifs, she displays critical distance to colonial iconographic traditions and reflects on Soviet education and social practice with this regard: "It seems to me that already in Soviet times people felt an unspoken hierarchy. The Russians were the titular nation. Belarusians and Ukrainians – their younger brothers. Then the Caucasian peoples. They are not Slavic, they are more remote, but they have an ancient culture, the sun, the sea and delicious food. And finally, the peoples of Central Asia, whose territory was violently included in colonial wars and divided into republics quite arbitrarily in Soviet times."[9] While Viktoria Lomasko ironically states that she is the last Soviet artist (Youtube 2020) (even though she

6 Lomasko reflects on her work in relation to the Soviet colonial orientalist (in the Saidian sense) tradition in a presentation entitled "I am the Last Soviet Artist" given at Kunsthalle Wien (March 6, 2020), accessible on youtube: Kunsthalle Wien, "Wednesday with… Victoria Lomasko: I am the last Soviet artist," YouTube Video, 1:04:41, March 6, 2020. Last accessed November 22, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDyaeUnrtLo.

7 An altered English version can be found here: Viktoria Lomasko, "In Tbilisi. "It's forbidden to be sad in Georgia."" *n+1* 27 (winter 2017). Las accessed April 14, 2021. https://nplusonemag.com/issue-27/essays/in-tbilisi/.

8 On Central Asia in a feminist decolonial perspective, see Vika Kravtsova. "Chto znachit dekolonizirovat'? Dekolonizatsiia, feminism, postsovetskoe," [What does decolonizing mean? Decolonization, feminism, the post-Soviet] *Krapiva* (30 December 2019). Last accessed April 14, 2021. https://vtoraya.krapiva.org/chto-znachit-dekolonizirovat-30-12-2019.

9 «Мне кажется, что и в советское время люди чувствовали негласную иерархию. Русские были титульной нацией. Белорусы и украинцы — младшими братьями. Потом кавказские народы — они не славяне, от нас дальше, но у них древняя культура, солнце, море и вкусная еда. И, наконец, народы Средней Азии, чьи территории были насильственно присоединены в ходе колониальных

was only 13 years old when the USSR dissolved), it is interesting to delve more deeply into how she critically reassesses the Soviet legacy and its persistence in post-Soviet Russia.

The Georgian Orthodox Church

[14] Viktoria Lomasko's critical view of Russia's relationship with the former Soviet republics is also reflected in her Georgian travel feature, in which she devotes a significant amount of attention to issues connected with religion, religious practice, gender, sexual orientation and culture. In this respect the Georgia feature is typical of her travel writing, in which the religiously legitimated social oppression of women is always a topic of paramount significance. Lomasko writes and draws about female circumcision, polygamy, abortion, virginity, domestic violence as well as underage forced marriages.

[15] In her text about Georgia, she describes the generally strong presence of the Orthodox Church in Georgian society and repeatedly mentions its active role in the enforcement of a conservative worldview with traditional family values and patriarchal gender roles,[10] her focus being on those people who in her view suffer from the enforced Christian order of things, mainly women and people who conform to the heterosexual norm. In her workshops with Georgian women, Lomasko felt the urgency to address the social control over females exerted by the family and the Church, stressing that women are dispossessed of their bodies in the name of Christianity. She describes in detail how homosexuals and LGBTQ activists are harassed by Orthodox clergy and believers who do not shy away from physical abuse, be it on the occasion of demonstrations (2013) or in everyday life. Lomasko moreover reports about the activists' critique of restrictions of free speech and the freedom of the arts on the grounds of religious arguments, which connects well to her own previous work on the "Watch Out, Religion!" case, in which the freedom of the arts (artists and curators) was eventually subordinated to the protection of religious feelings and "honor."[11] Lomasko in this passage compares the Georgian and the Russian legislation about hate speech and blasphemy, pointing out the absence of respective laws in Georgia—a result of the Western liberal influence on the constitution. This is tantamount to a preference for liberty and rebuff for the protection of moral values in Georgia, yet the incidents of aggression against women and sexual minorities point in another direction, one that resembles the Russian Orthodox rather intolerant stance. The latter is shared by the Georgian Orthodox Church that—unsuccessfully—opposed the passing of an antidiscrimination law for Georgia that included sexual orientation as prohibited ground of discrimination.[12]

[16] From these descriptions we can infer that Viktoria Lomasko speaks from a Western liberal perspective, in which men and women have equal rights, the individual should have full control over his/her body and sexual minorities should not be discriminated against. However, against the backdrop of Soviet atheism and leftist progressive convictions, it deserves mention that Lomasko's feminist emancipatory verve has deep roots in socialism and, until well into the 1930s, was a cornerstone of Soviet anti-religious social politics, brutally implemented in

войн, а в советская время достаточно произвольно поделены на республики», — размышляет Виктория.

Ekaterina Krasotkina. "Nevidimye I razgnevannye," [The invisible and the angry] *Takie dela*. Last accessed April 14, 2021. https://takiedela.ru/2018/04/nevidimye-i-razgnevannye/

10 On women in Georgian Orthodoxy, Soviet and post-Soviet, see Gurchiani (2021).

11 For a detailed report and analysis of the case, see Ryklin (2007).

12 https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/georgia-passes-antidiscrimination-law/. Last accessed September 14, 2022.

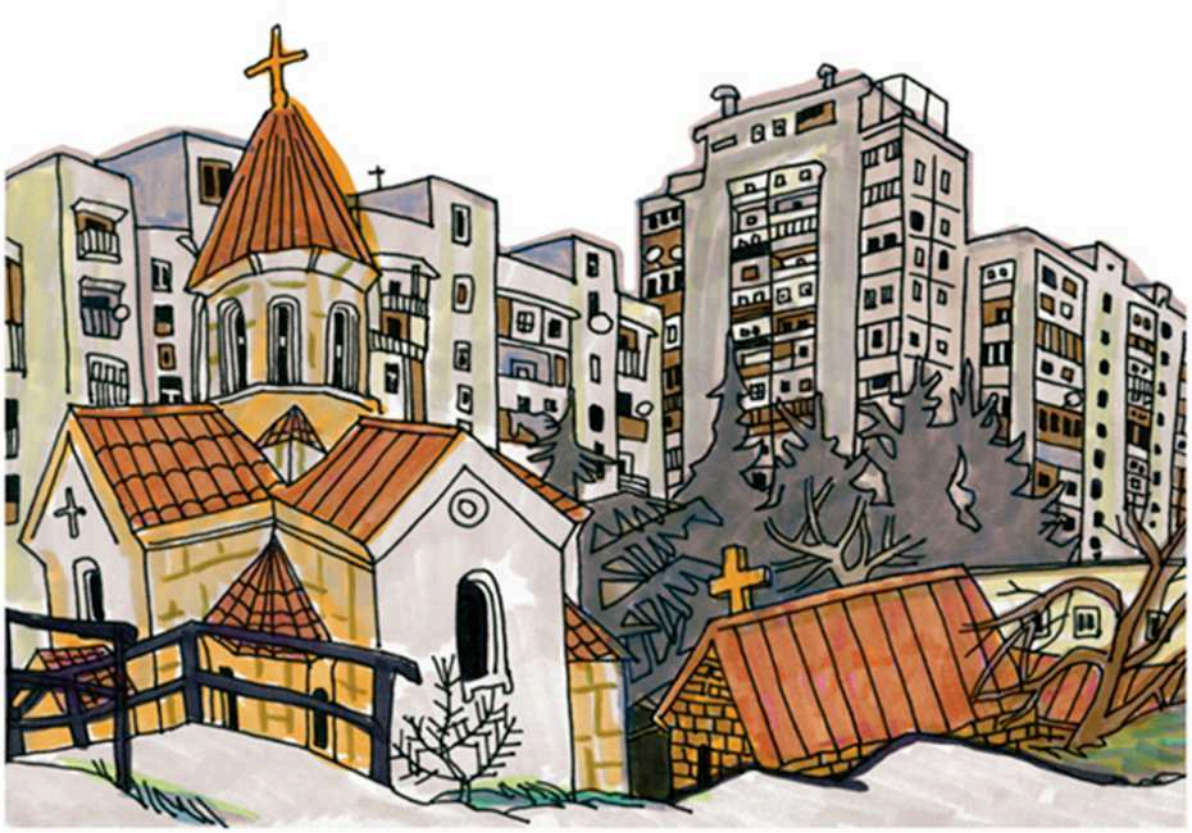

Figure 1 Victoria Lomasko, A Trip to Minsk, the part of the book The Last Soviet Artist.

allegedly backward regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia. Lomasko explicitly places herself in that tradition. This became obvious in a comment to an exhibition in 2017 when she affirmatively referred to the sentence that in today's patriarchic post-Soviet countries the most progressive family members were the grandmothers (Lomasko 2016, 35). Non-heterosexual desire, by contrast, was taboo in Soviet times, at best denied or ignored but also often attempted to be "cured" by means of psychiatric treatment. With their homophobic tendencies, hence, the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches connect well with Soviet discrimination policies.

Another of Lomasko's observations refers to the Georgian Orthodox Church's massive building of new places of worship in the capital Tbilisi. [17]

Lomasko includes one drawing in which she poignantly juxtaposes the architectural style of high-rising Soviet apartment blocks with the traditional sacral architectural style that is predominantly used for new churches. In the accompanying text she stresses the space consumed by the new constructions that arise on former playgrounds and other public spaces, thus threatening the city's already delicate social equilibrium. But most striking are Lomasko's thoughts about religion and politics in Georgia, particularly the Church's place in society, which she observes through the Russian prism. The Georgian Orthodox church, she claims, is more remote from the state than the Russian Orthodox Church, which for her is undoubtedly positive. She also appreciates its loser attitude in customs that express hierarchies by means of regulating the believers' behavior in the church: In contrast to Russia, in Georgia the members of the parish are allowed to sit down during worship and women may attend service in pants and without scarves, both unthinkable in a contemporary Russian Orthodox service. A less [18]

hierarchical relationship is also detectable among priests and their parishes. Lomasko finds Georgian clergy to be more easily approachable and expresses this in a separate drawing of a priest standing close to two women with bare heads, wearing trousers.

[19] According to the information that Lomasko provides about her working process, she was allowed to draw inside the church, which she did not expect against the backdrop of her Russian experience, but she does not delve into possible reasons for this treatment, potentially her privileged status as a Russian Orthodox sister-in-faith and artist. Generally speaking, Lomasko acknowledges differences and prefers Georgian Orthodoxy to its Russian counterpart. In this valuation Viktoria Lomasko can be considered a typical post-Soviet Russian intellectual. She embraces the Soviet era's progressive feminism and combines it with a liberal attitude in questions of sexual orientation. However, she prefers Georgian Orthodoxy to Russian Orthodoxy mainly because it is less palpable. Overall, she is critical of the rise of the Georgian Church and its alliance with nationalism, which in Lomasko's case is due to her sympathy with marginalized women and LGBTQ people, even though ironically her stance resonates with the imperial and Soviet Russian view of the Georgian Church as cradle of nationalism.[13]

Georgians – Armenians – Azerbaijanis

[20] Another important topic of Lomasko's feature is her reassessment of religious differences and nationalities in Tbilisi. She juxtaposes Armenians and Georgians, both predominantly Christian nations that draw on their ancient Christian traditions in constructing their identities. But whereas Russian and Georgian Orthodoxy belong to the Byzantine Greek tradition, the Armenian Apostolic Church has a separate tradition and was historically more loosely connected with Byzantium.

[21] Lomasko reports the family history of the Armenian Yana, whose family has lived in Tbilisi for four generations, representing the once large, even dominant ethnic group in the Georgian capital that has diminished significantly since the collapse of the USSR. Yana is nostalgic about the pre-1990s insignificance of national belonging in Tbilisi's social life. Lomasko quotes Georgians who dislike Armenians for their involvement in business and commerce, but also because they feel historically dispossessed of their own country by Armenians, whose presence beyond Armenia's confines they interpret as illegitimate dwelling on "foreign soil." The quest for a monoethnic populace, in turn, is a relic of the Soviet past. As mentioned above, the Soviet nationality policy took nationalism as a given and strove to create Soviet republics with respective autonomous subdivisions that would be linguistically, ethnically and culturally homogenous—a mission impossible, not least in view of the often dominant *religious* self-identification that was not at ease with secular Soviet categories. The by now 100 year-old demarcations provoke wars until the present day (e.g. the autumn 2020 and 2022 wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan).

[22] Lomasko writes and draws elaborately about Armenian, Georgian and Muslim Azerbaijani inhabitants of Tbilisi and their complicated relations. She closely describes Seimur Baidzhan, a writer from Azerbaijan who in his novel *Gugark* talks about the beginning of the Azerbaijanian-Armenian war around 1990. But she also quotes his descriptions of the widespread domestic violence among Azeris, not all of whom are foreign citizens, since Georgia is home to a significant Azeri minority. Through Seimur Baidzhan's mediation, Lomasko got in contact with other exile intellectuals from Azerbaijan. She quotes the blogger Günel Mövlud, who critically

13 I am grateful for Jesko Schmoller's insightful remarks on religion in the post-Soviet realm.

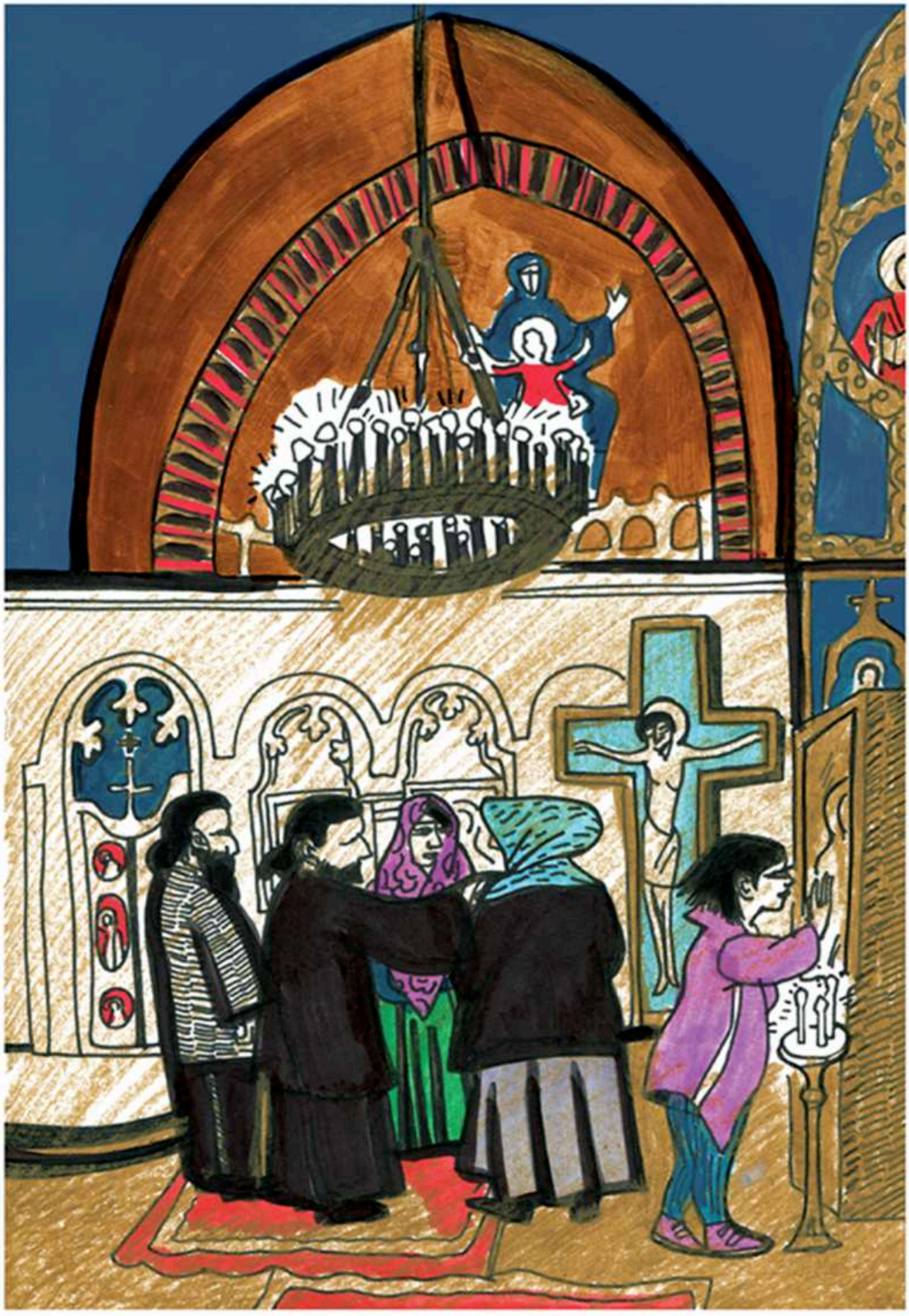

Figure 2 Victoria Lomasko, A Trip to Minsk, the part of the book The Last Soviet Artist.

writes about the situation of women in the Southern Caucasus, stressing the difficult situation of Azeri women in Georgia caused by patriarchal family structures that lead to violence, a lack of education for girls, arranged underage marriages and social isolation. Here Viktoria Lomasko puts forth a generalizing thesis about gender and morality in Caucasian societies. Rather than diverse religions, she asserts, a shared local culture is paramount for morality, which she shows in the notion of *namus / namusi* (honor and chastity).

[23] "In the Caucasus there is an expression that signifies the right conduct of a person in society. In the Azerbaijani and Armenian language *namus*, in Georgian *namusi*. For men, *namus* means honor, conscience. For women, *namus* refers exclusively to sexual behavior, to their unattainability."[14]

[24] Consequently, Lomasko considers the three south Caucasian societies to be similar in their normative gender models and ideas of respectability, their dominant religious self-description as Muslim or Christian and their innate hatred notwithstanding. She thus on the one hand extrapolates the Soviet era's transformations of religious customs into the national tradition (Gurchiani 2021, 108), while on the other hand questioning the religion-culture-nexus that reemerged—not least due to the Soviet nationality policy and widespread stereotypes about *natsional'nyi kharakter*—in the relationship of post-Soviet national groups. Subsequently, Lomasko quotes Seimur Baidzhan with the observation that the rigid norms of *namus* are tied to social status—for the poor, *namus* is to be achieved exclusively by means of social conduct, whereas particularly women from the economic elites can allow themselves to disregard *namus* rules without consequences. The Russian graphic artist gives examples for how *namus* is enforced by males and how their actions depend on their own and the woman's socio-economic status. But Lomasko also reports about a countermovement against *namus* that she clearly sympathizes with. Young activists, organized in an ethnically mixed group of "Caucasians" from Georgia and Azerbaijan, resist social pressure and offer lectures for their peers that are intended to educate "thinking citizens". In her discussion of *namus*, Lomasko takes a position that is rooted in enlightenment discourse, and here again traces of the Soviet heritage can be felt as she provides a Marxist interpretation of religious norms as "super structure" that reflect economic power relations and presents the activists' circle as a transnational progressive initiative, united in a struggle against irrational forces that limit the female's freedom and individual self-expression. In this context it should be mentioned that not only is *namus* a concept shared in larger parts of the Caucasus, but also that the kidnapping of young women for marriage would be a case in point that however remains beyond the travelogue's scope (Grant 2009, 77–82).

[25] In a comparative view of other former Soviet republics, though, revivals of gendered constraints based on religious culture can be observed as well. One illustrative example is the discussion of *uyat* (female shame) in contemporary Kazakh society. As Kudaibergenova (2019, 363–80) shows in her study of female bloggers opposing male attacks on their alleged shamelessness in Kazakhstan, some males seek to restrict women's rights of self-determination. Kudaibergenova, however, draws a different picture of the ways in which the neo-religious cultural pressure is countered: her female protagonists act out as individuals with a credible, since electronically documented personal story and employ cross-medial strategies to claim

14 На Кавказе есть термин, обозначающий правильное поведение человека в обществе: на азербайджанском и на армянском — «намус», на грузинском — «намуси». Для мужчины намус значит честь, совесть. Для женщины намус связан исключительно с сексуальным поведением, с ее недоступностью.

their freedom. These women operate on a performative level in social media rather than by means of real-life rational discussion, as the group Lomasko describes seems to do.

From these descriptions of Lomasko's travel feature it becomes clear that she can indeed be located in an established perceptional scheme — that of the Russian intellectual who travels to the imperial lands and appropriates them for his/her culture. Russian and Soviet knowledge production about the Caucasus provide an elaborate set of ideological tropes expressed in literary and iconographic traditions (Layton 1994; Maisuradze and Thun-Hohenstein 2015; Chkhaidze 2018). Lomasko strives to avoid these schemes, their imperial connotations and implicit hierarchies, displaying genuine interest for Georgia as a *different* country, especially in terms of religion. What remains from the Russian and Soviet intellectual tradition, though, are indiscriminate attributions such as "Caucasian cultures" towards which the intellectual takes a progressive stance, the wish to overcome "outdated" religious and social structures and to achieve equality. In post-soviet decolonial studies, similar positions have raised sharp criticism. In particular, the universalist heritage of the Enlightenment that makes us assume, for instance, that a modern and civilized society can only be secular was criticized as once more projecting specific western norms onto non-western societies. As Vika Kravtsova has shown, in the post-Soviet realm this pattern is particularly pertinent with regard to feminism, when Russian feminists speak out for Central Asian women, for instance (Kravtsova 2019). One may wonder, though, whether there would at all be a way in which a Russian female activist could display interest in other post-Soviet societies without tapping into the (post)colonial pitfall. Lomasko deserves credit for searching for new, less binary approaches to describing the Caucasus and, what is more, for critically reflecting on Russia's colonial heritage, although in her graphic travelogue about Georgia, Russia is present rather implicitly by means of topics that are relevant for both societies. Regarding religion, Georgia and Russia appear similar in terms of the Church's intolerance of sexual minorities as well as promotion of popular conservatism along with its impact on women and their bodies. But at the same time, Lomasko accepts the Georgian Orthodoxy and in fact presents it positively as *culturally different*. [26]

How does this resonate with "unity in faith" (*edinoverie*) and the concept of the Russian World (*Russkii mir)*? A more recent exhibition (opened in May 2019 in London) of Viktoria Lomasko contained a composition that she herself called *Russkii mir* and that she described with the following words: [27]

Against the backdrop of ancient ruins, in the midst of weeds there are communists, pre-revolutionary characters, a girl with a flag, symbolizing new patriotic sentiments, and also the figures of my parents. Daddy is holding his painting "The Clownade" in his hands that is critical of Putin's regime and that he carries to a demonstration in Serpukhov. The ruins of a church and the weeds represent the abandonment of contemporary Russia.[15] [28]

For Lomasko, the Russian World refers to Russia's inner condition and is associated with abandonment. The contrast to the officially hailed Russian World could not be bigger. The idea [29]

15 Dar'ia Radova. "Viktoriia Lomasko: o razdelennom mire I Poslednem sovetskom khudozhnike," [Viktoria Lomasko: about the divided world and the last Soviet artist] *Zima magazine*. Last accessed April 14, 2021. https://zimamagazine.com/2019/05/lomasko-separated-world/?fbclid=IwAR11F8L5kyCJnqA-Tp7SkO9wy6HBt/_2l8gBwTopd8QMzBw8oiozUixEHdYI.

С основной композиции, которую сама для себя я назвала «Русский мир»: на фоне странных руин, среди сорных трав стоят коммунисты, дореволюционные персонажи, девочка с флагом, символизирующая новые патриотические настроения, а также фигуры моих родителей. Папа держит в руках свою картину «Клоунада» с критикой путинского режима, с которой он выходит на демонстрации в Серпухове. Руины церкви и сорняки олицетворяют бесхозность современной России

of community is absent, the Church—symbol of Orthodoxy—is destroyed, but more strikingly a leader or landlord is missing—which is expressed in the Russian word *bezkhoznost'*, abandonment, literally "lordlessness." As becomes clear from this quotation, Lomasko's cautious praise of Georgian Orthodoxy as different from Russian Orthodoxy is a strategic statement showing that the way out of Russia's crisis would encompass the recognition of plurality and difference within and outside of its own territory.

Lasha Bugadze's First Russian

Who would a contemporary Georgian writer, born 1977, call the "first Russian"?[16] It is the [30]
medieval historical figure of Iuri Bogoliubskii, a nobleman from Novgorod that married the Georgian queen-to-be Tamar. As Bugadze asserts, "after two years he was kicked out of Georgia and thereupon invaded the country twice to win back the throne and his wife" (Bugadze 2018, 264). In the course of the centuries, this medieval historical event gained iconic status for the political liaison between Russia and Georgia. Bugadze's fictional prince Bogoliubskii, however, turns out to be impotent when with his wife but does have sex with animals. In Bugadze's version of the story, this is the reason why Queen Tamar has their marriage invalidated. Thus, in his novella of 2002, Lasha Bugadze transforms the dynastic episode into a political satire, even travesty, while deconstructing the common principle of chronological presentation in historiography. The narrator comments, "The allegory is obvious: the first Russian and Georgia's first disappointment, the first abuse, the first cruelty, the beginning of Georgian collaborationism" (Bugadze 2018, 453).

Lasha Bugadze's version of Tamar's story clearly is a post-imperial phenomenon, as it re- [31]
arranges discursive material from the period of subjugation. The motif of Georgia or the Caucasus as a sexually desired and subdued female and the Russian as her male conqueror has been firmly rooted in Russian culture since the early nineteenth century (Layton 1994; Sahni 1997). The tale has affected Georgian models of self-description well into the late twentieth century by means of the Russian-centered Soviet educational system. Bugadze transforms this material in such a way that he presents Tamar's and Iurii's marriage as an outcome of the bride and bridegroom's surrounding's strategic rationale. The Georgian nobility supports Iurii as prospective spouse even though they know he is an inadequate choice, and thus Tamar's Georgian fellow countrymen, by playing the Russian card, betray their queen. As the above-quoted passage shows, this is presented as the Georgian elite's "primordial sin," a blueprint for the later entanglement of Russians and Georgians. On behalf of Bugadze this interpretation of history is in many respects provocative, first and foremost with regard to gendered national discourse. In Georgia, Tamar is considered a strong woman; she was canonized as a saint. Along with Saint Nino, who baptized Georgia, she is the only female figure that acquired a place in the thoroughly masculine popular historical and religious consciousness. Both women are figures from the remote past, hence attributes ascribed to them are archaic and idealized and mirror traditional expectations towards female Christian behavior that in turn exert influence on conceptualizations of a Georgian woman's alleged nature. All the more remarkably, though, Bugadze's Tamar does not comply with idealized Georgian womanhood, for which purity and unlimited motherly dedication are paramount. His Tamar has desires

16 The Georgian text "The First Russian" was published in a journal in 2002; in 2017 it was followed by a documentary autobiographical novel about its reception, entitled *A Small Country*. In the German translation that I used for this article the latter bears the title of the first, *Der erste Russe* (2018).

of her own and she disentangles herself from the wishes and dynastic considerations of her surroundings. But most importantly Bugadze presents Tamar as a physical creature with a female body, which is unheard of when addressing a Saint, whose body is by definition the site of transcendental processes. This violation enraged Georgian society even beyond the reading audience when the text was published in a journal in 2002. Bugadze was accused of blasphemy and the desecration of a national saint.

[32] The scandal around this text in turn became the subject of Bugadze's 2017 documentary novel *A Small Country*. The narrator and protagonist of this novel is an author, a character that shares many traits with Lasha Bugadze. Having published his Tamar travesty and received death threats on its grounds, he recounts the way in which the national media, friends and family all become involved in the affair that for him lays bare the interaction of religion and politics in a small country. In the course of the turbulent events, the author comes into contact with the highest representatives of state, Eduard Shevardnadze, former Soviet Secretary of State and then president of Georgia, and Ilia II., the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, who urges him to recant, promising him under that condition that he would be granted forgiveness.

[33] *A Small Country* shows Georgia in the process of reconstructing a Christian Orthodox religious identity after decades of decreed atheism as well as compromised Church activity that coexisted with oppositional nationalist projections. The alleged offence against Saint Tamar displays the intricate connection of religion, gender, the nation and traditionalist understandings of social coexistence as outlined above, Bugadze's main focus being crude radicalism and the absurd social side effects of this revival of Orthodoxy under the auspices of nationalism. The book is also instructive with regard to the role of religion and the Church in Georgia's relationship to Russia, hence with the question of "unity in faith," religious difference and their role in the Georgian-Russian decolonization process. Especially in the passages that deal with the war of 2008, in which the province of South Ossetia was occupied by Russia, the latter is presented as an ever-interfering superpower neighbor that invades and occupies territories as it desires, using the Orthodox Christian affinities strategically—and with the active support of Georgian clergy—to ease the enragement about the territorial offence. Bugadze exemplifies this in a funeral ceremony in which the Russian troops celebrate themselves as brothers in the Orthodox faith with their generously treated Georgian enemies:

> [34] The [Georgian, ML] patriarch solemnly enters the city of Gori [Stalin's birthplace, ML] that is occupied by the Russians and celebrates the mass in an occupied church. The [Russian, ML] general is bareheadedly standing aside him. Afterwards the patriarch walks down the stairs holding on to the general's arm. This means, Russia does not fight against the Georgian people, but against the Georgian government. This means, the great Orthodox country stays friends with the minuscule Orthodox country (Bugadze 2018, 434–35).

[35] This thoroughly staged scene, in which religious and military hierarchies are deliberately blurred and entangled, represents a typical case of the employment of "unity in faith" as an ideological tool to exert control over Georgia, but notably not only by the Russian side, but also by the Georgian Orthodox authority. But this fact is stated rather soberly and certainly does not represent the novel's main concern. In *A Small Country*, Russia is rather used as the key word for the encrusted economic and social structures that certain parts of Georgian

society—namely the Western-oriented liberal elite that the author as well as his *alter ego* in the novel are part of—desperately want to overcome.

In order to show the younger generation's criticism, Bugadze's narrator proceeds as iconoclast in the literal sense, and his choice of a female saint is hardly coincidental but shows the pertinence of a chauvinist worldview in which female bodies are subject to the male gaze and male judgement. He refers to a number of famous icons of Tamar which depict a woman with strongly visible eyebrows. Instead of perceiving the icon in what Clifford Geertz calls a "religious perspective," as a manifestation of a transcendental truth, he beholds it like a photo of somebody with a cosmetic abnormity and consecutively reflects about whether describing Tamar's monobrow is blasphemous and under what conditions artists may at all touch up national saints. Moreover, Bugadze reflects on the fatal entanglement of the Georgian elites with established and in tendency self-contained power structures, be they Soviet or post-Soviet, nationalist or ecclesiastical. In crucial passages of the novel the eminent influence and power of the patriarch, an undisputed fact in Georgia's political reality (Gurchiani 2021, 104), are described as ambivalent, as a game with expectations, really. "At once I understood, no I discovered: If anybody here was waiting for something, then it was not for my answer […], but for which questions the patriarch would ask and how determined he presented himself. All eyes were on him, not me" (Bugadze 2018, 410). The patriarch's power and his authority do not originate in himself or in some higher religious truth, they are only ascribed to him by his Georgian Christian followers, which makes him a slave of his own popularity. Notably, like Viktoria Lomasko, Lasha Bugadze hence treats church and religion as a secular force; transcendental questions generally remain beyond their scope. Instead, for Bugadze the patriarch is symbiotically tied to the government, which ironically means the Orthodox-turned Communist Eduard Shevardnadze who was in fact baptized by Ilia II. himself (Metreveli 2021, 63). This reflects the ambiguous stance of Church authorities towards the various wings of the early post-Soviet nationalist movement and the government (Metreveli 2021, 60), to which the church was at times closely related, resulting in the conclusion of the 2002 concordat that among other things privileged the Georgian Orthodox Church in restitution claims (Metreveli 2021, 63; Kekelia 2015, 127, 131). The novel contains the description of a pompous and tasteless ceremony in which the Georgian patriarch and Shevardnadze preside over the cornerstone ceremony for the new Holy Trinity (Sameba) Cathedral in Tbilisi, the biggest donor for which was a Jew (Bugadze 2018, 206). In the novel, a few zealous clerics are presented as members of organized crime or connected with the Secret Service, including its ties to the former Soviet KGB. Once people of such a background protested against the travesty "The First Russian," the stumbling block of the affair, their reaction may just as well have been motivated by the wish to defend Russia (Bugadze 2018, 362). The enragement about Bugadze's alleged slander of Tamar in that case could have been a smoke screen for the rehabilitation of the humiliated prince Iurii Bogoliubskii, who prefigured the imperial Russian Romantic scheme of desiring and attaining the Caucasian woman. After all, Tamar would not contend with Iurii's impotence, in other words his inability to satisfy her sexual and dynastic desires, which in a patriarchic view would be "shameless" on her behalf and an unbearable humiliation on his. The offence against Russia total is no less blatant: unable to satisfy Georgia / the Caucasus, it instead turns to sodomy! To make things worse, Tamar's defenders in Bugadze's *A Small Country* are exactly those people who in the name of the holy nation call for censorship and stand united under the first and foremost "Russian," Eduard Shevardnadze, the incarnation of Soviet Georgia (Bugadze 2018, 258).

[36]

Bugadze's novel's great strength is the nuanced view of the author figure's religiously offended antagonists. Shevardnadze is not reduced to a scapegoat, incarnating the failures of Sovietization. On the contrary, he is a father figure that almost magically produces loyalty among whatever audience he addresses and who during his presidency draws criticism for the only reason that the religious authorities have become sacrosanct and untouchable. Even those Christians who are enraged by "The First Russian" and consider it blasphemous are shown as a group with diverse motivations and allegiances, naïve religiosity next to hypocrisy, priests in pursuit of an ecclesiastic career next to the instrumentalized mob. [37]

In the scandalous turmoil that the novel describes, "Russia" thus is a mere catchword that serves to externalize conflicts in a society that is fatally self-centered, not least because of its tribal fabric that connects society by family and social onuses, a patriarchic view of women included. What is metaphorically called "Russia" actually is something within Georgian society, a metonymy or rhetorical trope that ties the Georgians together against an abstract enemy: all that is done wrong by Georgians in Georgia, including supporters of Orthodox "unity in faith." Against this backdrop the Georgian political mantra of a decision between East and West, between the Russian Empire and Europe appears to be a mere rhetorical strategy that is cynically employed to present random political choices as inevitable and forms bonds which prevent the nation from embracing a truly post-Soviet decolonial future as a modern, liberal society that would also have to critically reassess its national traditions. [38]

In the novel, Bugadze's narrator comments on a film project that resonates with his observations of the functioning of Georgian society. He writes about "a small country that is convicted to eternal flippancy, a great parody on a little country that simulates being a serious nation and a serious country" (Bugadze 2018, 568). While this diagnosis can easily be explained by Georgia's postcolonial or post-imperial situation that produces behavioral patterns designed for hegemonial outer viewers (be it Russia or "the West"), the function of the religious link ("unity in faith") between Russia and Georgia in this unequal relationship strikes me as remarkable. Even under Communism the Georgian Orthodox church enjoyed a certain autonomy, and religion, particularly by means of its cherishing in the private sphere, became the cradle of anti-Soviet resistance and nationalism. But this influence came at the price of a close alliance with the state, first the Soviet and then the post-Soviet Georgian state. At the same time, history's irony, this is a striking similarity with the Russian Orthodox Church that has a long symbiotic history with the Russian state and now willingly supports neo-imperial and nationalist political action, even war against Orthodox brothers in Ukraine. [39]

Conclusion

Viktoria Lomasko's Georgian travel feature and Lasha Bugadze's documentary novel, whose struggle with their countries' specific nationalist discourse and colonial heritage regarding religion I showed in my analysis, share some fundamental insights and argumentative strategies. Both address the fact that Orthodox Christianity, employing the concept of "unity in faith," functions as a hegemonic discourse not only within Russia and Georgia, but also more generally in Russia's relation with neighboring countries, where Orthodoxy is claimed as Russian property and used as political and spiritual leverage for promoting political cooperation. In Lomasko's case the critique of "unity in faith" entails a reconsideration of the imperial-turned-nationalist concept of the Russian World, in which she displays a hybrid set of anti-imperial, Soviet and Western attitudes towards Georgia. Remarkably, situations of religious contact [40]

are also conceptualized in similar ways in both works, as they focus on differences within Orthodox Christianity. Budgadze even restricts his view to the Georgian Orthodox Church. The two writers also unanimously stress the exclusive role assigned to Orthodoxy in their respective national discourses that render minorities almost invisible. Moreover, both authors reflect about the traditional gender concepts that the Orthodox Church reinforces as part of the national discourse in the post-Communist realm and take a western liberal stance against it, although Bugadze retains elements of patriarchal views on women. But even though both critical, secular works ponder the functioning of Orthodoxy in the context of the Georgian-Russian colonial relation, their works refrain from clear-cut guilt discourse, let alone of nationalist tinge. When read as complementary works, both works' fundamental repudiation of the markedly post-Soviet alliance between Church and state is striking. "Unity in faith" connects Russian and Georgian Orthodox antiliberal agendas that bring neo-imperialist Russians and nationalist Georgians in close proximity.

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