2 Interview with Grigorii Chkhartishvili (Boris Akunin)

Note: The 2015 Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies' annual Young Researchers' Conference was held at the Villa Virgiliana in Cuma, Italy. The conference began with an interview between Stephen M. Norris, Professor of History at Miami University, and Boris Akunin, the bestselling Russian author. Below is a transcript of the interview, transcribed by Emily Walton, a 2016 graduate of Miami University. The original transcription has been further edited.

Stephen Norris: This conference is called "Writing the Past, Righting Memory," a play on words that gets at serious subject matters; namely, the ways that Russian historians, writers, scholars, and officials have tried to write new histories after 1991 and address important historical legacies. These are also the implicit goals of your ongoing project, *The History of the Russian State*. I have several questions about it but I'll start with a broad one: What are your goals in writing this history, and how do you plan to "use Occam's razor in order to reveal what really happened," as you state in the introduction to the first volume?

Boris Akunin: Well, hello everybody. I'm happy to be here. Yes, this is my first time in this part of Italy and I have never participated in an event like this in my life, so it is a new experience for me; that's why I did not want to make a speech or a lecture, because it is not usually my kettle of fish. I am not the one who speaks – I am normally the one that writes. Talking about this new project of mine, *The History of the Russian State*, I should say that this is something that I have wanted to do for a long, long time. The main goal is not just to deliver a message to the public, it is something I want to do for myself because I have been living for many years in my country and I feel that I do not understand it properly. Russia is still a country of unpredictabilities for me. This country keeps surprising me, recently more than ever. In order to understand it, I thought that I have to go to the very beginning.

As those of you that have studied Russians know very well, our favourite question is *Kto vinovat'?* (Who is to blame?). We have two almost sacred questions, both even became titles of classical novels. One is *Kto vinovat'?* The other is *Chto delat'?* (What is to be done?) Russians are never really interested in what is to be done, they are more interested in who is to blame. I grew up hearing this kind of talk ever since I was a kid. Everybody around me had been trying to figure out who was to blame because everybody agreed that life was terribly wrong. Things were not going the right way. This view is also a very Russian trait: Russians seem to be either absolutely unhappy with their life or absolutely euphoric about it. When I was young, the first general idea was that it was Stalin who was to blame. He spoiled everything and we had to go back to Lenin. That is what my parents used to say in the 1960s. Then we discovered that no, it was Lenin who was to blame. Then we discovered that no, it was the Romanovs who were to blame because the country was not well-ruled under them and they were not able to save this country, so it was their fault. But no, it was not the Romanovs, it was Ivan the Terrible who was to blame. No, it was not Ivan the Terrible, it was Ivan III who created this

state. No, it was the Tatars. Well, everybody liked that idea and Russia accepted the Tatars because we have a lot of them in Russia today. I thought that I had had enough of this and I had to go back to level zero and to explain everything to myself.

I discovered that first of all, Russian history, probably more than any other history, is full of myths and lies. In Russia, historical science existed for a very short span of time, a part of the nineteenth century and a part of the twentieth century. Before, it had been practically non-existent, because it was only Nikolai Karamzin who invented it in a serious way at the beginning of the nineteenth century. During the twentieth century history became so full of ideology that it became no longer a science but a kind of propaganda. Soviet authorities used history in order to create myths for pedagogical purposes, so that young people would be proud of their great ancestors and their great country. I thought then and I still think now that this is an awful misconception. History is not about being proud. History is like an instruction manual, how to "use" your own country. It should be something such as: don't put your fingers in here or else you will be hit by electricity. If you want to achieve this do this and this and do that. History should be about that which you have to know. You have to know the truth. You have to know that if a country succeeded in something it was because of this and this and this. If there was a defeat we have to know everything about it: why it happened, what didn't go the right way. I wanted to write this sort of history.

This is something I believe that in our time no professional historian can do in general, because a professional historian is usually a specialist in quite a narrow field or someone who wants to create a new concept and build a new theory just to try to prove it. When you try to prove this theory, it is almost impossible to evade the temptation to push forward evidence that only supports the theory and to push down evidence that does not. My history is not like this. From the beginning, I had no preconceived conception. I didn't want to prove anything to anybody. I just wanted to understand what is true and what is probable among all the facts that I have been taught at university and that I learned in studying history. I wanted to go step by step along this ladder. Little by little I would be able to understand and explain to my readers what this Russian state is like.

I should say that my book in Russian is not called "A History of Russia" but "The History of the Russian State." It is a political history, a history of power, a history of relations between those in power and the people. It's also a history of a country written by a writer, not by a historian, which is not a new thing. Some of you have read the wonderful books by Isaac Asimov, who was known mostly as a science fiction writer but who also wrote histories. And now in the UK, for example, the novelist Peter Ackroyd is publishing a new volume of his history of England.[1] These books do not contain long commentaries and have no footnotes; nothing, in other words, to frighten off normal, peaceful readers. They are not meant for students nor for scholars; they are meant for people such as my wife, who claims to be uninterested in history. I want them to be interested in history. That is why these volumes of Russian history are also supported by a series of historical novels, which in turn create a history of Russia seen through the eyes of one family that has been living in Russia for 1,000 years. These historical novels are mostly about the history of human relations and the history of love: it is 1,000 years of love. In the novels I can run free with my imagination, with what I cannot write in my nonfictional histories. Of course, it's also part of a publishing scheme, because we were expecting most readers to buy just my historical adventure novels and hopefully to get hooked by them, to get interested in what was actually happening during this period and then to go to the book shop and buy the non-fiction volume, which is quite expensive because there are a lot of illustrations. The most difficult thing here is not the facts, which are more or less well known, but how to calculate the right balance of heaviness and lightness, of entertainment and seriousness, to avoid losing the reader's attention. I had to work on this formula when I was preparing the first volume. With the second volume I made it just a bit lighter. Now I am finishing the third volume and I understand that the second one was just a bit too light. Now I'm putting more "heaviness" in the third. So that's how it works.

Norris: Speaking of the third volume, I assume it's going to be on Ivan the Terrible and his period. Can you give us a sense of what you are going to argue in it, what will be heavier, and what in general you are planning?

Akunin: The first volume, which was entitled *A Part of Europe*, covers the period before Russia was conquered by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The second part is about the Tatar-Mongol period and it's logically entitled, *A Part of Asia*, because Russia was a part of a vast Asian empire in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and first half of the fifteenth centuries. The third volume is called *Between Asia and Europe*. It starts in the mid-fifteenth century, with Ivan III, and ends at the beginning of the seventeenth century, during the *smutnoe vremia*, or the Time of Troubles. By my calculation we are currently living in the early years of the sixth Russian state. The first Russian state was the pre-Mongolian state, which began between Novgorod and Kiev and then moved to Vladimir before it collapsed when the Mongols conquered it. For two hundred years afterwards there was no Russian state, it was just a dominion of the Tatar Horde. My third volume is therefore about the second attempt at building a Russian state. It was started by Ivan III in the middle of the fifteenth century, and proved to be very successful, but in the end it failed and ceased to exist in the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the country was conquered by the Poles. There would be a third Russian state in the seventeenth century, then a fourth created by Peter the Great when the state had to be rebuilt and moved even closer to Europe. Then there was the fifth state, the Soviet empire. And now we are living in the sixth state, the post-Soviet one, which as it seems is not going too well right now.

Norris: How many of these states will you narrate?

Akunin: There will be nine volumes in total and I will stop in 1917.

Norris: Why stop then and not cover the Soviet state, particularly after the appearance of the very controversial history written by Alexander Filippov that referred to Stalin as a great state builder?

Akunin: Oh I'm not interested in that and nobody's really interested in it either, the book was just something meant to receive part of the state budget. It's in no way important. Why am I stopping in 1917? Well, you see my main task is to make sure that I am distanced from the events I am describing. I am not for this part or for that part, I try to be neutral. And I think that if I start to describe the events of the twentieth century after 1917 I feel I wouldn't be able to stay objective because it is too close to me personally. The Soviet era passes through the history of every family, mine included. I feel as though I wouldn't be able to cover it the right way, so better not to cover it at all. I should say, however, that I have found another way of describing the history of the past one hundred years in Russia. Since it is emotional, and since I cannot stay objective, I thought I would try to tell the story with the help of fiction, where you don't have to be objective. So I am now working on a series of serious novels, which is something new for me. Up to now I have only written entertainment. Just for a change, I wanted to publish a typically Russian serious series of thick, heavy, gloomy, and depressing novels. I wouldn't care about sales and bestseller lists at all, I would do it just for myself. They would be novels the way I always wanted to write, what we might call impolite literature. I wouldn't try to be polite or entertaining.

Instead, in these new works I would press my problems on my readers. I wouldn't care about the charter you make before writing a detective novel. Inhaling, exhaling, you have to keep rhythm. So here you have to go like this, then do this, then this, before this. You have to count the length of this chapter, and this part of the book should be that long, and here it only has to be three pages long. In my new project there will be nothing of this kind. If I want to describe a dialogue that is important for

me, it can go on for twenty pages. I don't care. This is this kind of novel like *Doctor Zhivago*. I hate this book, but okay this is something. And I was also thinking of the sort of dusty, thick albums of family photographs that our grandmothers have. What intrigues me most is that there are people with faces that do not exist any longer. Their expressions, everything about them. Many family members who look at these photos do not even know who they are. There is a mystery to them. They are somehow related to your family but nobody knows how, because grandmother and grandfather are dead already and nobody will tell you who they are. When you also look at class photographs of, say, a gymnasium in 1915, or even a Soviet secondary school in 1939, the same thought occurs. You look at those young faces and you try to figure out what happened to each of them, because it is Russia and because this is the twentieth century. You know deep down that most of the boys were either killed or imprisoned and most of the girls were probably never married or were widowed. And you try to guess, looking at them, what happened to each of them. So, I called this series of novels *The Family Album*, and it is built on these notions. I focused on a photograph, an old photograph, and made a story around it. In 2012, I published the first novel, which is about the Civil War and the Revolution. Now I am finishing the second novel, which will be about the 1920s. I have no overall plan for this series, although I am usually very meticulous and make plans for decades ahead, at least when it comes to mass literature. Here I don't press myself. I just write it as it goes. So, if I ever finish, it will be my plan for the twentieth century. There may be ten novels, and if so, there will be a novel dedicated to each decade.

Norris: I want to shift focus for a moment and talk a little more about your previous projects, then return at the end to this family history you have just described. Again in *The Turkish Gambit*, Fandorin declares, "If you live in a state you should either cherish it or leave it. Anything else is parasitism or mere lackey's gossip." Varvara, who is his love interest in the novel, responds that a third way is for an unjust state to be demolished and a new one built in its place. Fandorin shoots back, "A state is not like a house, it's more like a tree. And it's not built, it grows of its own accord, following the laws of nature and it's a long business. And it's not a stone mason who is required," he says, "but a gardener."[2] I understand we should not read your fiction as a statement of your own philosophy, especially a novel written in 1998, but I'm curious, who might that gardener be today? Are there other possibilities aside from these three? Second, now that you've launched your own *History of the Russian State* series, how do you think the tree of Russia has grown under its own accord and what are the laws of nature it follows?

Akunin: This quote has been thrown back at me a lot! It is not me who is saying this. It is Fandorin who says it. Fandorin here is twenty-two years old. After that, and over the course of many novels, he has changed and his opinions have changed. I personally think that the state is not a tree. If it can be compared to something it would be a house. It has to be built and built according to a certain plan. I think that there is a difference between the notion of a country and that of a state. Now, a country is probably a tree – something that grows. But a state isn't. A state is something that is built by the people who create it. In most cases you can always name the architects of this state. This is true for the United States of America and for Russia. For example, now we are still living in a building the foundation of which was created by Ivan III in the fifteenth century. We are still living within its basic dimensions. I believe now that if we do not change it, this model of authoritarian rule will be recreated again and again and again no matter who wins. Tomorrow liberals will chase away Putinists and after ten years the building will again be something like it is now. So it's the foundation that is wrong and we have to change it.

Norris: As you have stated in several interviews, you initially planned the Fandorin series that made you famous as a response to the pulp mystery in the 1990s. According to one tale, you initially got the

idea because your wife was reading a pulp fiction novel on the subway and had covered it up with a Dostoyevsky cover or something like that.

Akunin: No, just with brown paper.

Norris: Just with brown paper because she was embarrassed to read the pulp fiction of the 1990s. You wanted to write something explicitly more middlebrow, more elegant, more intelligent. In the end you have almost completed the Fandorin series. I think you're going to write two more? Is that right?

Akunin: One more. [Note: Akunin published his final Fandorin book in 2018.]

Norris: One more. In the end you have used this series to rewrite the history of the late tsarist period in Russia and rewrite it for an audience in post-Soviet Russia. Looking back, what do you think the Fandorin series helped to articulate about the Russia that was lost, that period of tsarist history?

Akunin: I didn't really intend to rewrite Russian history or to recreate a myth of Russian history. This series is ultimately not about history, it is about literature. I am fascinated not by the history of tsarist Russia, but by the people from a time when Russian fiction was great. Russian literature is the best thing to happen to my country: it is also the greatest gift Russia gave to mankind. Literature is something where Russia is second to no other country. If we talk about the Russian novel, about Russian literature they are – in all seriousness – not so much playing with history, they are about something else, something bigger. I do love most classical authors. I also dislike some of them. Russian literature is very much about life itself, about being alive ... it is not "classic" per se. Classic is something meant for a museum. I believe that as soon as an author becomes a "classic" and is treated like one it means he or she is dead. If you want to argue with him, if you want to mock her, if you want to deride him, it means he or she is still alive. I have been very heavily criticized for my rewriting of Chekhov's play *The Seagull*. But it means he is still alive to me. Or Dostoyevsky – I wrote a detective novel called *F.M.* and it's a remake of *Crime and Punishment* because Dostoyevsky irritates me a lot. It means, though, that he is alive. He is not an icon to me, he is not a statue. I admire him but sometimes – I also hate him. To me this is what literature is about. This view is very individual: I cannot read Cervantes, for example. I respect him, but he does not touch me in any way. Absolutely not. Shakespeare is alive. I am not moved by Moliere, but Chateaubriand is alive for me. Again, it is very individual and it doesn't have to be the same for everyone. My relations with literature are very private. I forgot what we were talking about ...

Norris: The Fandorin series and how you have rewritten the past. Because in the end it is as much a historical series as it is a mystery one, and it attempts to rewrite the past from just before the Russo–Turkish war all the way through the Revolution–a crucial period in Russian history.

Akunin: Well, I wouldn't advise anybody to study history by Fandorin novels! That would be a bad idea. Even if we talk about their historical elements they should be understood with caution, because I write for my contemporaries and there are a lot of deliberate mechanisms in there just for fun, just to make people smile. History is in one sense not important for me within the series. At the same time, everything I describe in those novels could have happened. This is a must. They must be a version of history that is possible. Sometimes it is not really plausible, but still it is technically possible. It is possible that the Russian army was stuck in Plevna because there was a gifted Turkish spy who provoked the army to undertake a useless siege instead of going straight to Constantinople. There is a mystery to the actual event. No one can adequately explain why, after their initial success, the Russian army stayed at Plevna and why tens of thousands of lives had to be lost there. Why not leave a smaller

detachment to undertake the siege while the rest of the army could go on? This is a mystery to me, so I found an explanation for it in *The Turkish Gambit*. I have another novel, *The Spy Thriller–Shpionskii roman.* It is really impossible to explain how in 1941 Hitler could surprise Stalin with his assault. How could he possibly keep 190 divisions nearby, from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea, and then attack the Soviet Union by surprise? There has to be a reason, so I offered one. Or I have another novel, which is called *Quest*, about the Battle of Borodino in 1812. There is also a mystery in it. It was a very bloody battle between the French army and the Russian army and the French were winning. They were taking one position after another, albeit with a heavy loss of life, but still they were winning. The only thing that Napoleon needed to do was to send his old guard to attack and a final offensive would have been the absolute end of the Russian army. He didn't do it. Why didn't he do it? This is a mystery. He didn't do it and he lost the war and he lost his troops and eventually he lost everything. So, I created a quite fantastical version of events because I could not find a realistic version of them.

Norris: Your answer begs the question: Why is spying, why are conspiracies, the answer to explaining everything? Are you running the risk of writing a conspiratorial history of Russia?

Akunin: No, I don't believe in conspiriology in general. But I write about spies because they are so interesting to describe and because they create psychologically interesting situations where someone you think is your friend or your lover is actually your enemy and aims for your ruin. As a writer, these situations create the biggest dramas and the biggest tragedies. It can happen not only in politics, but in family life as well.

Norris: Speaking of conspiracies and the one involving Stalin in 1941, this conference is not one where we only seek to investigate the way things have been written about the past but the way things haven't been "righted" about the past. You recently conducted a series of very interesting interviews with Alexei Navalny and you broached the subject of Stalin, and whether or not Stalin had been properly dealt with in Russian history today. You suggested that Russia needs to drive a stake into the heart of Stalin's ghost. Navalny said that a ghost is a ghost and that the Stalin question is one for historians to solve, not current politics. This exchange made me think of Alexander Etkind's very interesting book *Warped Mourning*; in it, he also suggests that Russian society has not addressed the past forcefully enough, particularly the Soviet past. In his exploration of this theme, Etkind argues that one of the reasons for this failure is because "In Russia and Eastern Europe, novels, films, and debates about the past vastly outpace and overshadow monuments, memorials, and museums."[3] For him, the memory of the past is a hot and liquid one in Russia, rather than cool and crystalized, making it always unsettled. You, on the other hand, solely write novels and film scripts, so do you agree with this assessment? Or can novels, films, and debates produce a moral, more solid form of remembrance and in doing so maybe even drive that stake into Stalin's heart?

Akunin: Since you mention this dialogue with Alexei Navalny I should first say that although I disagree with him on many points, here I ultimately think that he was right. He said a very important thing, that there is no use arguing about Stalin because Stalin is alive as long as we still live in this sort of country. When we create a normal country Stalin will become obsolete, he will die by himself and no one will be interested in reviving him. It is true that during the perestroika era and in the 1990s there were a lot of novels, films, and non-fiction works that described all of Stalin's crimes. The problem is that, as we can see now, it did not produce any real effects because Stalin is still inside too many people's brains. There are too many examples of how many people's mental existences have not been changed. We are still living in the same structure devised by Ivan III, a structure that keeps on producing authoritarian rule, where the will of the ruler means more than the law. It is like this, of

course, under Putin. It was like this under Yeltsin too, who is supposed to be a democrat and a liberal. He was also an authoritarian ruler. And this circumstance was not a coincidence; it was not something that happened because he wanted it to be like this and because the general logic of the state pushed him into it. His advisors pushed him into it, we all pushed him into it. This notion is really unpleasant to think about but it is true because we wanted him to be re-elected as president in 1996 no matter what and no matter what the cost because we were afraid of a Communist return to power. We were ready to look – actually to close our eyes – at some things we did not want to see. So Yeltsin's era ended in an authoritarian state; it ended, of course, in Putin. I think what we have to do is change the structure of the state completely and then nobody would even think of Stalin as an effective manager or whatever they call him these days.

Norris: The Navalny interviews came after you had done similar ones with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, but more importantly after you had become much more openly political. You may remember that when we first met in 2008 for an interview, you said to me that your major headaches were first traffic and then Putin – but that traffic was by far the bigger problem at the time. You also stated that you always saw yourself as a belletrist and wanted to write as one, not as a writer in the Russian sense, a *pisatel'*. What changed, specifically? How is it that you moved from traffic being your primary headache to Putin to being your primary headache?

Akunin: This move was a big disappointment for me because I always wanted just to be a writer, and when I heard the term "public intellectual" applied to me it made me shudder. I didn't want to be a public intellectual. I didn't want to be a *pisatel'* because this is a role I simply never wanted to play. I didn't want to be a Herzen, a Dostoyevsky, or a Tolstoy. I mean not just that I lacked their talents, but I lacked their desire to be a shepherd of the people and to show people the white and black, to move this piece here because it is the right move and to avoid this move because it is the wrong one, in other words to determine what is good and what is evil for other people. I just wanted to entertain. But Russia is such a peculiar country. You get into situations from which you cannot escape because otherwise you risk losing your self-respect and there is nothing worse than that.

Norris: Is the answer in media for you, at least in terms of change in society and maybe even changing the state? You have always been an avid blogger but you are now an even more political blogger and run one of the most-read blogs in Russia.

Akunin: I started my blog in 2010 and by then I was already a public intellectual, sadly, so it didn't make any difference.

Norris: Is this then the way to reform the state? There are some scholars who write that the blog sphere represents the best thing of a viable civil society in Russia today.

Akunin: No, this is something to let out the irritation that otherwise gets pent up. Sometimes you just have to let it go. There was a brief period in 2012 and 2013 when it seemed to me that blogs and internet forums actually did have a possibility to change the course of events. But because Putin and his team are so hopelessly stupid and ineffective they cost us this opportunity to live peacefully. Now there is no possibility for it. They are so proud that they crushed the opposition and its media outlets. What they did, however, was to crush the thermometer that showed how high the societal fever was. It doesn't mean that the problems have been solved. It certainly doesn't mean that the country is in good health, it's in much, much worse health and it will end badly. Their mistake and ours was there was at least one place to blow off steam. And now there isn't.

Norris: You have closed a lot of your projects. The Fandorin series has one more novel. The Pelagia series is finished. The *Brotherhood of Death* series is finished. The Nicholas Fandorin series is over. And you said you won't write using the names Anatolii Brusnikin or Anna Borisova anymore since you have been exposed as these authors too. You have begun to publish under the name Akunin-Chkhartishvili. So perhaps the last, best question is this one: Is the Akunin project over? "Boris Akunin," does he or it matter anymore?

Akunin: The Boris Akunin Project as entertainment is for all practical purposes over. There will only be one more Fandorin book to write and I am fed up with it [See note above]. It is not interesting to me anymore. I am getting older. I am getting, well, not wiser, but duller. As Pushkin said, "aging drives you into prose." It doesn't mean that I wouldn't entertain myself once in a while with writing something hilarious – if I have a good idea, why not? But my new project is this history series and this family album series. They are what make life interesting for me.

NOTES

1 Ackroyd published the fifth volume in his series in 2018: *Dominion: The History of England from the Battle of Waterloo to Victoria's Jubilee* (London: Thomas Dunne, 2018). The series began with *Foundation: The History of England from Its Earliest Beginnings to the Tudors* (London: Thomas Dunne, 2013). A planned sixth volume will bring this series to a close.

2 Boris Akunin, *The Turkish Gambit*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Random House, 2006), 54.

3 Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 176.