THE DECLINING IMPORTANCE OF THE PLACELESS IMAGINARY IN RUSSIAN DEBATES ON THE CHECHEN WAR (1993-1996)

"Everything occurring at different times is [now] happening at the same time, and it is difficult to draw out from this buzzing, multi-layered hive a single waxen thread."
Mikhail Epshtein, "culturologist", 1991[1]

"I want history to have a happy end."
Sergei Bodrov, filmmaker, 1996[2]

On the cover of the December 1994 issue of the Russian literary journal *Molodaia gvardiia* [*The Young Guard*], we find an outline of the former Soviet Union, spread out and alone on the earth. A heavily used and chipped hammer is lying on the West side and a dull sickle is in the East. On roughly the territory of the present-day Russian Federation (RF), there is a collage of American dollars. A huge strand of wheat, taller than the width of the RF itself, is ripping through a one-dollar bill in the Northern Krasnoiarsk region in Siberia. The rest of the territory is blank, except for flames in Tajikistan and Chechnya. Behind the earth is a sun, either rising or setting.[3] In short, the image is ridiculous, but also compelling for a number of reasons. The issue was released perhaps only days after the November 25 bombardment of the Chechen capital, when thousands of residents of this mid-sized city were either killed or left homeless as a military force consisting of tanks, helicopters, and combat aircraft attempted to oust the separatist leader, Dzhokhar Dudaev, from power in the Chechen Republic. The journal's cover art shows the entire North Caucasus region, which the Russian Empire first controlled in the mid nineteenth century, and which continued to be a part of the Soviet Union and now the RF,

[1] Mikhail Epshtein, "Posle bydyshchego. O novom soznanii v literature," *Znamia* 1 (Jan. 1991), 226.
[2] Sergei Bodrov, "Khochetsia, chtoby u istorii byl khoroshii konets…," *Kinotsenarii* 3 (Feb. 1996), 120.
[3] Sergei Luginin, cover art, *Molodaia gvardiia* 12 (Dec. 1994).

already blank like the rest of the former Soviet Republics. According to the artist, Sergei Luginin, it seems Moscow has already lost Chechnya.

The image on the cover of *Molodaia gvardiia* illustrates some of the problems associated with imagining the RF as the Russian nation. With the image of the wheat, Luginin evokes many of the agrarian themes of Romantic anti-capitalism, which one ubiquitously encounters in the ideas of nineteenth and twentieth century Russian artists and intellectuals.[4] But in showing a struggle between the de-nationalizing forces of global capital and a more traditional economy based on the land, he no longer includes parts of the historical Russian state, which the RF inherited, in the imagined victory of the strand of wheat over the immense sea of dollars. The exclusion of Chechnya in the image not only admits the ultimate failure of nineteenth-century Russian imperial expansion in the region, but also rejects the state's role in maintaining contemporary international boundaries. The picture seems to tell the reader of the periodical to just let it burn. Thus, the cover art of this issue of *Molodaia gvardiia*, a journal primarily associated with the right wing of the Russian Writers' Union, was at once anti-imperial and, consequently, against military action in Chechnya.

RF President Boris Yeltsin told a correspondent for the newspaper *Izvestiia* in February 1992 that the fledgling state must get beyond the "great power" notions of Soviet foreign policy. Furthermore, he argued that the RF must conceive of a new idea of "state interest in post-Imperial Russia." Yeltsin seemed especially fixated with contrasting notions of empire and nation and said that "the influence of imperial thinking [in Russia] is strong," which seemed to

[4] A good overview of the agrarian theme in Russian Romantic anti-capitalism can be found in James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1966). Additionally, monographs on the seminal nineteenth-century Slavophile movement address agrarianist ideology, such as Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles: A Study of Romantic Ideology* (Gloucester MA: P. Smith, 1965), and Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

imply that Russians as a cultural or ethnic group could only conceive of themselves in an imperial context, and that this consciousness was a primary obstacle to post-Soviet nation-building.[5] The president's statement might have puzzled the reader, however, because of its anachronistic reference to "Imperial Russia," the political entity that ceased to exist when tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne in February 1917. Despite this seventy-five year gap between Imperial and post-Imperial Russia, Yeltsin nonetheless voiced his opposition to empire as a valid means of imagining a nation after the Soviet Union disbanded.[6] Further complicating the matter, he implicated Russians as the primary actors in the imperialist state, all the while specifically charging them to forge a nation.

Yelstin's statement about empire and its identification with ethnic Russians is an interesting problem in post-Soviet society because of the lack of clearly identifiable metropole, from which the imperial project historically originated.[7] The idea of "Russia", rather, is a kind of placeless imaginary, whereby intellectuals, artists, and politicians attached more significance

[5] Boris Yeltsin, Boris Yeltsin, "U Rossii net kakoi-to osoboi, tainoi politiki v iadernykh voprosov," interview by Nikolai Burbyga, *Izvestiia* 22 Feb. 1992,

[6] Benedict Anderson argued that one of the processes that engendered nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was opposition to imperialism along ethnic-linguistic lines. See *Imagined Communities*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 19-22, 83-111.

[7] Of course, the Russian Empire grew out of the Muscovite State, which was itself initially a protectorate of the Western Mongolian Empire from mid-thirteenth century to the late fifteenth century. But the capital of Imperial Russia from the time of Peter the Great until the Revolution was Saint Petersburg, a city build from scratch on land annexed from the Swedish Empire in 1703. My point is simply that the imperial Russian state attempted to perform the dual role of a classical empire, while representing the historical Russian nation, however that was imagined. During the time of Nicholas I (1825-1855), the policy of "Official Nationalism" operated as the guiding ideology of the state toward ethnic Russians, even as the empire expanded at an unprecedented rate. In his discussion of "official nationalisms" in Europe during the nineteenth century, he states that the ideology "can be understood…[as] stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire." He claimed that, although this phenomenon occurred in the Habsburg and British empires alike, Russia during Nicholas I was the most obvious example. See, *Imagined Communities*, 85ff.

Thus, it is especially difficult historically to differentiate between the Russian nation and the Russian empire, and this quandary has informed much of the intellectual discourse of the past two centuries. Imperial Russia was both of these, and yet it was neither, if we accept Western European models for our analysis. Of course, models always fall apart when we examine a case too closely. As I argue, however, we find it difficult to identify the simplest terminology like metropole and colony. Is the metropole Moscow or Petersburg? Or can we enlarge it to mean all of European Russia, which included many subject peoples like the Tatars, Votiaks, and Kalmyks, among others? Can we then call Siberia a colony, even though as early as 1710 Peter I established the area as a *guberniia* with the same general administrative structure as Moscow *guberniia*?

to the community's relationship with a cultural tradition than to physically bounded space. The impact of the war in Chechnya (1994-1996) on these debates about the meaningfulness of a placeless imaginary is immense because the participants envisioned the recent conflict in terms of the literary representation of imperial expansion in the Caucasus in the nineteenth century.[8] While both fictional accounts of the conflict and attempts to present a scholarly debate about it very obviously allude to these earlier sources, I argue that the contemporary setting of the war serves to deconstruct the placeless imaginary of literary and cultural myths. Both nationalists and liberals were interested in what the conflict meant in terms of a perceived imperial legacy, but recognized that their opinions about Chechnya existed within a general atmosphere of ideological indifference to ideas of Russian nationhood.

The historical relationship of intellectuals and artists (and the society they engendered) with the state provided a framework for defining Russian imperialism, and the place of ethnic Russians within the empire. In the post-Soviet RF, these same intellectuals and artists were dealing with a loss of their traditional bases of cultural power. In so doing, they sought to explore the inadequacies of mythic or literary models defining the relationship between the state and society. In some cases, they expressed means of *getting beyond* these models. But this perceived need to formulate a cohesive national idea based on cultural myths, combined with the recognition that there is an absence of enthusiasm for such an idea, informs us as to the nature of participation during a period, in which many analysts in the RF, and in the West, saw bleak prospects for genuine democracy in the area.

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[8] The Russian Empire began its conquest of the Caucasus with the annexation of Georgia in 1801, and the wars lasted until the Chechen imam Shamil surrendered to tsar Alexander II in 1859. See John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908).

Much of the literature on post-Soviet "identity formation" addresses the issue of the ambivalent impact of empire upon ethnic Russians.[9] According to Richard Pipes, the historian who shaped whole generations of American scholars of the Soviet Union in the fifties and sixties, wrote in 1995 that ethnic Russians suffer from a profound "confusion of nationhood, statehood, and empire." He furthermore claimed that this confusion caused many of the economic failures after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[10] Within the RF itself, scholars writing in the most prestigious academic and literary journals followed Yeltsin's line about imperial thinking, and debated what "Russia" meant under and after a communist-imperialist state [sic]. Articles such as Valerii Tishkov's "What is Russia [*Chto est' Rossiia*]," and the many roundtable discussions published in *Voprosy filosofii* [*Questions on Philosophy*] and *Novyi mir* [*The New World*] tackled the problem of defining "Russia" without empire.[11] What especially gave "Russia" its *national* character, many wondered, if the Russian state had always been imperial? Many of them relied on the literary and philosophical traditions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to answer this question. They contended that "Russia" primarily existed,

[9] The word "*russkii*" is an adjective which means, "pertaining to the ethnic Russian people," while the word "*rossiiskii*" is an adjective which means, "pertaining to the Russian state." Both are usually translated into English as "Russian." When applicable, I will use "ethnic Russian" when translating the latter, and "citizen of the Russian Federation" when translating the former.

[10] Richard Pipes, introduction to *Remaking Russia*, by Heyward Isham (Armonk NY: M.E. Sharp, 1995), 1-2. This familiar argument is repeated in a number of books, such as Chris J. Chulos, and Timo Piirainen, eds, *The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation: National Identities in Russia* (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000), Timothy Colton, and Robert Legvold, eds, *After the Soviet Union: From Empire to Nations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), and John Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[11] Valerii Tishkov, "Chto est' Rossiia," *Voprosy istorii* 2 (1995), 3-17. Tishkov, a well-known Anthropologist who is frequently interviewed in the pages of popular daily newspapers such as *Izvestiia* and *Nezavisimaia gazeta* [*The Independent*] about contemporary nationality problems, and whose numerous articles and books have appeared in English translations and anthologized in the United States and Europe, cites exclusively American sources in his discussion about the existence of Russia as an empire. Thus, the question of empire itself is mediated through scholars like Pipes and Zbigniev Brzezinski, whose article, "The Premature Partnership" in the March/April issue of *Foreign Affairs*, frames Tishkov's question, "Is Russia a national government or multi-national empire?" and will it end up like post-colonial France and Britain, or like post-Ottoman Turkey? Other typical examples of this debate about empire in the mid-nineties include A.S. Panarin, et al, "The Risk of the Historical Choice in Russia [Risk istoricheskogo vybora v Rossii]," *Voprosy filosofii* 5 (May 1994), 3-26; Mark Freigin, et al, "The Russia, in Which We Find Ourselves," *Novyi mir* 1 (Jan. 1993), 1-37.

historically, as an idea of high culture. The history of the Russian state, however, could not provide a model for an idea of a new democratic Russian nation. Therefore, while "Russia" might exist as a cultural idea, a clearly demarcated space representing the ethnic Russian people, the likes of which Luginin conceived on the cover of *Molodaia gvardiia*, was beyond imagining. When politicians and journalists attempted to justify the RF's boundaries, they did so with the logic of pragmatism, and not the rhetoric of nationhood.[12]

Causes and Major Events of the War in Chechnya (1991-1996)

The conflict in Chechnya during Yeltsin's presidency was directly related to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the regional independence movements that came out of opposition to the 1992 Federation Treaty, which stipulated the relationship between the Autonomous regions within the RF and the central government in Moscow.[13] Most of the

[12] Dmitrii Furman, a senior scholar at Moscow's Institute of Europe, argued that legality and peace demanded that the previous "imperial borders" remain the same even if they are not "fair". Furman, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 3 July 1992, reprinted in Zbigniev Brzezinski and Paige Sullivan, eds, *Russian and the CIS: Documents, Data, and Analysis* (London: M.E. Sharp, 1997), 66.. In the aftermath of Putin's invasion of Chechnya in 2000, however, Furman took a strong stance in support of Chechen independence, and could not conceive that the RF's borders would be able to include the Republic. See, Paul Globe, "On Equal Terms," *RFE/RL Newsline* 14 March 2000, E-Journal on-line, available from <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2000/03/5-not/not-140300.html>, [11 May 2002].

[13] When examining the causes of ethnic conflict that splintered the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, many scholars saw Soviet Nationality Policy as a large part of the problem. Ronald Suny argues that the specific Bolshevik colonial project was to nurture nationalist tendencies and forge socialism at the same time. For non-Russians, the Nationality Policy established a system of symbols and relationships that would encourage collective action within ethnic categories, while provoking anger in some due to the central authorities' strong-arm economic and social engineering. Thus, Suny and others argue, non-Russians in the Soviet Union had a nation with no state.

The content of the policy originated with the idea of *korenizatsiia* (rootedness) formulated right after the Revolution, and which stipulated support for native language instruction, the creation of a native intelligentsia, and general institutionalization of ethnicity in the political system. The Nationality Policy legally defined a citizen according to their ethnicity, which was connected to an ostensibly autonomous territory in the Soviet Union. More concretely, members of titular nationalities in the various autonomous regions and republics enjoyed privileges in state employment, which were somewhat akin to affirmative action, and had their own Communist Party organizations. But, as Terry Martin argues, the policy contained the strange paradox of engendering ethnic cleansing, because the state defined nationality collectively according to a specific set of guidelines, which, among other items, regulated the ethnic group's relationship with the state and other nationalities.

One example, which helps to explain the Chechen independence movement as a result of Nationality Policy, is forced exile in 1946. When certain segments of the Chechen population supposedly collaborated with the Germans during the brief occupation in 1942-3, Stalin blamed the entire ethnic group, and had them exiled to Kazakhstan. See, Ronald Suny, *Revenge of the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), and Terry Martin,

history of the Chechen independence movement in the nineties is connected with the figure of Dzhokhar (pronounced "ja-KAR") Dudaev, a Soviet general, who was the highest-ranking military officer of Chechen descent in Soviet history.

In October 1991, Dudaev returned to Grozny, the Chechen-Ingush capital, to lead a coup against the Soviet government and proclaimed independence for the Republic.[14] In December, the Soviet Union formally disbanded. Two and a half months later, Chechnya (without Ingushetia), along with Tatarstan, refused to sign the Federation Treaty (Tatarstan later relinquished, signing in 1994). During the next few years, the Dudaev-led government in Chechnya managed to maintain control over the region with little overt pressure from Moscow. Nonetheless, Yeltsin gave substantial aid to the Chechen Provisional Council, an anti-Dudaev militia led by Umar Avturkhanov. In November 1994, Yeltsin ordered the first full-scale military invasion of Chechnya. In the second half of December, Russian planes and helicopters intensively bombed Grozny, reducing most of the city to rubble.

During this time, Dudaev's forces begin taking Russian hostages from the civilian population in Chechnya and nearby provinces, exchanging them for money, arms, or Chechen fighters in Russian captivity. By January 1995, news of the Grozny bombardment hit Russian and Western media, which by and large strongly condemned the attacks for their seemingly pointless destruction and violence. But Russian media were also firmly critical of the Dudaev government, which was represented as a mafia organization with criminal ties to many parts of the Russian Federation. Nonetheless, the conflict began to isolate Russia from the West and, in

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The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[14] Information from this chronology is taken from Diane Curran, Fiona Hill, and Elena Kostritsyna, *The Search For Peace in Chechnya : A Sourcebook, 1994-1996* (Cambridge: Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1997); Brzezinski and Sullivan, *Russia and CIS*; I.N. Eremenko, and Iu.D. Novikov, editors, *Rossiia i Chechnia (1990-1997 gody): Dokumenty svidetel'stvuiut* (Moscow: RAU-Universitet, 1997).

February 1995, the European Union refused to initiate new trade relations until Russia found a peaceful solution in Chechnya.

Throughout the first half of 1995, fighting continued without serious possibility of a peaceful resolution. Finally, after Chechen field marshal Shamil Busaev captured a hospital in the Stavropol region north of Chechnya and took 2000 people hostage, RF Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin agreed to negotiate with Dudaev. From July until the end of the year, the federal government and Chechnya conducted marginally successful peace negotiations, while skirmishes continued in the smaller cities and villages of the Republic. In concert with the RF parliamentary elections, residents of Chechnya elected Doku Zavgaev as their president in December in an uncontested race. Much of the media in the RF, however, believed the former communist leader, against whom Dudaev led the coup in 1991, to be nothing more than Yeltsin's puppet.[15]

Peace talks broke down again in the beginning of 1996, and fighting escalated, with a Chechen force retaking Grozny in early March. When peace talks broke down again during the next month, Yeltsin appointed General Aleksandr Lebed National Security Adviser and Security Council Secretary, and asked him to take charge of the peace negotiations. Nonetheless, fighting continued until early September, and the last Russian troops did not leave until 3 October. General Lebed estimated that 100,000 people died in Chechnya, although that figure is still disputed.

In the few works published in English on the conflict, scholars have written on its role in constructing a "post-Soviet Russia." Pontus Sirén, for example, argues that the events, "which began as a minor regional conflict in the periphery of the Russian Federation, has turned into a watershed in the development of modern Russia. It has crystallized the problems Russia faces as

[15] See, for example, Igor Rotar's editorial in *Izvestiia* 14 Dec. 1995.

it tries to redefine its political and cultural identity in the post-Soviet era."[16] Anatol Lieven's *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, however, deconstructs the very notion of a Russian "nation-building" project in the nineties. He asserts instead that the Chechen War represents, apart from the failure of state power, the weakness of both statist and ethnic Russian nationalism in general.[17] Fundamentally, he sees the war as a Russian defeat, not because of anything the Chechens themselves accomplished, but because of the political, social, and cultural problems in the RF during the mid-nineties. Lieven's point is interesting because, rather than exploring ways in which nationalism leads to violence, or how it could potentially lead to violence, he shows how nationalism fails.[18]

Although the conflict provides a centerpiece for discussions about nationhood and categories of identity (and especially the critique of these categories), specific events in Chechnya like hostage crisis in Budennovsk became more the territory of media spectacle and less the topics of intellectual debate. The historical and cultural meanings of the conflict in its entirety figure more prominently in the literature, film, and journals of high culture during the period. In contrast to the many eyewitnesses who wrote about their experiences during the war, the many interested and vocal intellectuals, who were securely sheltered from the violence in the Caucasus, believed that the conflict was worth discussing in the context of moral and cultural life in the RF.

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[16] Pontus Sirén, "The Battle for Grozny: The Russian Invasion of Chechnia, December 1994 – December 1996," in *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis*, ed. Ben Fowkes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 139.

[17] In dividing contemporary Russian nationalism into two categories, ethnic and statist, I am following Thomas Parland's analysis. He claims that the latter "adhere to exclusively Russian values [sic] including Orthodoxy and Russian peasant communal traditions." These groups include Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as a moderate, and the blatantly neo-Fascist organizations like *Pamyat*. Parland writes that the statist nationalists are more concerned with maintaining the "traditional" borders of the Russian state, and which include anticommunists like former presidential candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskii, and the leader of the RF Communist Party (and former presidential candidate) Gennady Ziuganov. Thomas Parland, "Russia in the 1990s: Manifestations of a Conservative Backlash Philosophy," in *The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation: National Identities in Russia*, eds. Chris J. Chulos and Timo Piirainen (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000), 123-124.

[18] Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Imperial Russia and the Placeless Imaginary in its Historical Context

Much of artists' and intellectuals' understanding of the more recent conflict in Chechnya is based on their understanding of imperial expansion into the Caucasus in the nineteenth century. This understanding was, furthermore, grounded in literary expression of the period and in the culture of the so-called Golden Age of Russian literature.[19] This *literary* legacy concerning the conquest of the Caucasus provided politicians, journalists, and artists with a potential means for exploring the more recent conflict in terms of the RF's *imperial* legacy.[20] Fundamentally, then, many segments of elite society in the RF imagined imperialism as part of a Russian literary history. For these elites, a fundamental question in the mid-nineties was, to what extent, if any, can we connect events of the present day to those of a previous historical period?

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Mark Beissinger argues that, despite the fact that empires no longer exist (i.e., those states calling themselves empires), we nonetheless discover the ubiquitous claim that states are engaging in imperialism, which leaves scholars who study empires at a particular loss as to how to define such a state. Beissinger traces the origin of this new context of empire to Western critics of the Soviet Union, which filtered into a discourse within the Soviet republics themselves concerning, first, the Soviet Union's inheritance of the Russian Empire as a political project, and now, the Russian Federation's inheritance of a Soviet legacy of empire. But Beissinger points

[19] The Golden Age in Russian literature generally refers to the period between the time Aleksandr Pushkin began writing in the early nineteenth century and when Lev Tolstoy published *Anna Karenina* (1878). The term also refers to the literary culture that such works engendered. The writers of the Golden Age were among the first to write in a Russian vernacular devoid of French and the language of Old Church Slavonic, which characterized the literature of the previous centuries. This new literature was predictably more concerned with contemporary issues than its predecessors. Also new to the nineteenth century was a literate public, mostly comprising the nobility, but nonetheless sufficiently large to warrant the creation of a society interested in domestic literature. See, Thais S. Lindstrom, *A Concise History of Russian Literature*: *Volume 1, From the Beginnings to Chekhov* (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 83-85.

[20] Even Dudaev himself acknowledged Mikhail Lermontov, the nineteenth-century writer whose major works all addressed the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, as his favorite poet. Harsha Ram, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary Myths and Media Representations of the Chechen Conflict," (Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, 1999), 1.

out, quite correctly, that in a previous context, the state used the term "empire" as a positive definition of its own polity, while today the claim is unambiguously critical of a state, which no longer calls itself an empire. Thus, social scientists and historians talking about such "empires" risk reifying this newly constructed concept, just as we risk doing so with concepts such as "the nation-state," or "identity." As Beissinger points out, "The truth or falsity of such claims is often difficult to establish. However, the claims themselves and the discourse that they engender have a remarkable capacity for shaping reality."[21]

Although we find continual references to Western sources in the criticism of the War in Chechnya in terms of "Russia's imperial legacy" in the RF,[22] Beissinger does not address the domestic origins of how intellectuals were imagining imperialism and its legacy as part of a literary trope. In the nineteenth century, an entire genre of prose and poetry about imperial expansion into the Caucasus emerged from some of Imperial Russia's most famous names in literature. Susan Layton argues that literature's characterization of the military campaign in the region, and its description of the peoples of the Caucasus, expressed for the first time a tension between notions of empire and nation, even though many of the writers themselves were initially supportive of the imperial project.[23] The tsarist state envisioned the Caucasus as "Russia's own Orient," complete with its own civilizing mission, which worked to define itself as a Western

[21] Mark Beissinger, "The Persisting Ambiguities of Empire," *Post-Soviet Affairs* (1995), 150. Arthur Rieber also makes this argument, when he states the need to "make analytical distinctions between the self-perception of the imperialists and the critical perception of the scholar." See Alfred Rieber, "Russian Imperialism: Popular, Emblematic, Ambiguous" Russian Review 53 (July 1994), 331-335.

[22] See, for example, anthropologist Valarii Tishkov's article, "Chto est' Rossiia," *Voprosy istorii* 2 (Feb. 1995), 3-17, in which the academic cites the Polish-American political scientist and policy analyst Zbigniev Brzezinski when he asks the question, "Is Russia a national government or a multi-national empire?".

[23] Susan Layton, "Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery," in *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, eds. Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 80-99. Southern expansion into the Caucasus began with Ivan IV ("The Terrible") in the 16th century, but did not take off entirely until Catherine the Great's plan to isolate the Ottoman Empire and establish a direct trade route to India. It was a fantastic plan, even according to her immediate advisers, and never even came close to realization but nonetheless it informed imperial policy in the 19th century. See, Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*.

imperial power. The contrast between Imperial Russia and the Caucasus was a way of bringing Russia closer to Europe by attempting to emulate the characteristics of Western imperialism, and its conceptions of the colonial Other.[24]

Writers of the period, however, many of whom served in the region as military officers, presented a more ambiguous picture of the imperial project and ethnic Russians' development as a people in relation to the non-Russians (*nerusskii*) they encountered in the empire. While the state generally viewed expansion into the Caucasus as necessary to its imperial development, and the peoples of the region as hopelessly backward, Layton argues that, "[Aleksandr] Pushkin [and other writers] exposed the abyss [of us and them] by dissolving boundaries between Russia and Asia, for better or worse."[25] In dissolving these boundaries, the writers increasing viewed the state as an "alien institution, fundamentally hostile to the national community."[26] One of the themes, in which writers of the Romantic period embellished, is the juxtaposition of law and freedom. For Mikhail Lermontov, Pushkin, and the young Lev Tolstoy, the opposition between Russian "rational" law and Caucasus "natural" freedom at once affirmed the empire's civilizing mission in the region and lamented Russians' estrangement from the nobility of the Caucasian savage.[27]

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[24] Ibid., 1-2. See also Slezkine for a discussion of shifting perceptions in official and literary discourse about the imperial Other, and how these perceptions were a factor of imperial Russia's and ethnic Russians' own self-perception, especially as it related to ideas filtering into the country from Western Europe after the time of Peter the Great. Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 390.

[25] Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: The Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

[26] Layton, "Nineteenth-Century Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery," 84.

[27] The specific examples are too numerous to examine here, but some notable examples that Harsha Ram points out in her analysis of the Romantic period in Russian literature are Aleksandr Pushkin's "*Kavkazskii plennik* [Prisoner of the Caucasus]" (1822). In Mikhail Lermontov's work, we find "*Cherkasy* [The Circassians]" (1828), in addition to his own version of "*Kavkazskii plennik*" (1828), and "Izmail-Bei" (1832), an attempt to describe the cultures of the mountain peoples of the Caucasus. See, Harsha Ram, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary Myths and Media Representations of the Chechen Conflict," (Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, 1999).

But in this paradoxical association, Harsha Ram claims that a whole series of cultural generalization were fixed in the imaginations of Chechens and ethnic Russians alike, which "has lingered on in the discourses of today" about the conflict.[28] At the base of the Caucasian literary myth is a transference of values, whereby the idea of Chechen customary law "initially establishes a negative contrast that allows for the identification of Russian and even Soviet culture with Europe." Yet, by highlighting the organicism of such a legal system, the writers, its reading public, and future intellectuals were able to reverse this connotation to one, in which the people of the Caucasus are "more capable of guaranteeing elementary justice to its people" than formal law is capable of doing so to Russians.[29] Ram states that the alienation arising from such identification with Chechen customary law creates a second opposition (the first is, as I mentioned, between Russian civilization and the savagery of the Caucasus), which is "situated within Russian culture itself, between the Russian state and the creative intelligentsia."[30]

In comparing nineteenth-century literary myths about the Caucasus with representations of the recent Chechen conflict in the RF press, Ram argues that while political and historical actors on both sides of the present conflict are all too aware of the literary myths, the media have nonetheless taken the place of literature as giving the region its current connotative significance. "Perhaps for the first time in Russian culture, literature has been eclipsed by the popular media as a source of cultural critique, aesthetic symbols, and alternative truths."[31] Ram claims that, for the first time in Russian history, a press independent of state controls accompanied reportage of a major political event. Thus, she concludes, the existence of a press independent of state control in the representations of the War demonstrates the development of civil society in the RF:

[28] Ram, 4-5.
[29] Ibid., 6.
[30] Ibid., 8.
[31] Ibid., 15.

> Relying on the simultaneity of largely uncensored daily news coverage, [journalists] affirmed the existence of a civil society consisting of veteran human rights activists and dissidents from the Soviet era, liberal democratic as well as right-wing nationalist politicians alienated by the maneuvering of the ruling Yeltsin establishment, as well as new civic formations such as the mothers of Russian conscripts serving in Chechnya.[32]

In evaluating Ram's positive conclusion, we should not forget that the new media elite in the RF had no more influence on state policy in its criticism of the war as the old literary elite had in its criticism of Russian imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. The new means, with which writers created and engaged theirs publics, is the true significance of the press in the post-Soviet states.

No less important, however, are the ways, in which members of high culture viewed the transference of power from themselves to the popular media. While this dichotomy between literary high culture and popular media is not explicit in the discourse about the Chechen War, the declining importance of the placeless imaginary in this context is undoubtedly the result of this transference of power, and the perceived need to engage a public that the independent press created.

* * *

In approaching the placeless imaginary of literary and cultural myths, the participants in the debates about the War in Chechnya expressed three primary concerns. The first is the liberal or nationalistic expression of Russian victimization and the state's role in this victimization, or at least the state's inability to prevent it. The second and third categories, however, are directed inward and are attempts at self-criticism. Here, by self-criticism, I mean either the expression of a self-conscious shift from one ideological perspective to another (or personal liberation from ideology in general), due to a perceived inadequacy in the first position, *or* the attribution of an

[32] Ibid., 2.

ideological position, which is usually associated with the author or journal, for which the author writes, onto another party, in order to criticize them. The latter of these is still clearly self-criticism, albeit without an admission of guilt. I identify the second concern in questions of Russian imperialism and the history of empire in the Caucasus, which is self-criticism in the author's relation to the state. Finally, in discussing the conflict, writers expressed the problems of representing Russian cultural identity, which is self-criticism in the author's relation to the people.

Citizenship and the placeless victim in "official" nationalist and liberal discourse

In late 1995, the "Center for Social Connections" of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs released in cooperation with the FSK (Russian Intelligence Service) a pamphlet entitled *Kriminal´nyi rezhim: Chechnia, 1991-1995 g.g.: fakty, dokumenty, svidetel´stva* [*The Criminal Regime, Chechnya 1991-1995: Facts, Documents, and Evidence*], which gives the standard line that Dudaev's regime undermined the integrity of the Russian state. On the cover of the blood-red pamphlet is a drawing of a swarthy youth with a headband and a machine gun, which he appears to be firing with animalistic zeal (he is juxtaposed with a large, roaring animal of some type, so that this point is not lost on the reader).

The contents of the publication are, as the title states, a collection of "documents," primarily taken from letters written to the Russian army's newspaper, *Krasnaia zvezda* [*The Red Star*], in addition to press releases from politicians, and supportive statements from academics and other public intellectuals. Also, we find an uninformative correspondence between Yeltsin, Chernomyrdin, and General Grachev,[33] probably included only to give the pamphlet legitimacy as a primary source of documentation about the war. The pamphlet and its contents are

[33] General Pavel Grachev was defense minister until 1996 and is now generally blamed for convincing the president to take action in the region. See, Curran, et al., *The Search For Peace in Chechnya*.

important to consider, however, as a document calling itself a document, especially since the use of documents was extremely polemical in the late eighties and early nineties. The "fat journals"[34] all published such documents (for awhile, one saw the rubric, "*dokumenty svidestel'vuiut* [Documents Give Proof]" in every issue of some journals) exposing atrocities of the past, usually concerning writers and other cultural figures during Stalinism. Thus, pamphlets like *Kriminal'nyi rezhim* attempt to be historical documents about innocent victims of an oppressive government. The great, but unsophisticated, irony here is that the government itself is releasing them.

In the introduction, editor Aleksandr Gorlov, a member of the centrist pro-government political faction the Stable Russia Movement and Duma candidate during the 1995 elections, wrote about the Dudaev regime in Chechnya as undermining the Russian nation-building project. He writes of Russia trying to create a "normal" country in the aftermath of communism. In contrast to Russia's efforts, Dudaev represents the fanaticism of revolution, from which the country has only recently been liberated. In another document, posing as an historical essay, the author writes that, while we should not condone the past wrongs done to the Chechen people, which included the imperialist war in the nineteenth century, and the deportation to Kazakhstan in 1944,[35] this should not provoke distrust of the Russian state.

Other items in the book include a list of atrocities that "bandits" in Chechnya have committed against Russians, and letters from Russian pensioners in Chechnya, explaining the horrible treatment they received at the hands of the Chechens. These letters are interesting

[34] The term "fat journals" refer to the literary periodicals of the Soviet academy. They were very drab, thick, and printed on cheap paper. The term comes from the avant-garde painter Erik Bulatov in the 1970s. See, The World Guide, *The People and Culture of Russia*, internet on-line, <http://www.shareviewstv.com/svculrus.html>, [12 May 2002].

[35] During 1942-1943, the German army occupied the North Caucasus. The following year, Stalin accused the entire Chechen people of collaborating with the Nazis and deported between 1.4 and 1.7 million people to Kazakhstan. In 1956, Khrushchev allowed them to return.

because they are so formulaic. The daily lives of older women and men, who subsist on meager pensions, is disrupted by armed youth, much like the one on the cover of *Kriminal'nyi rezhim*. With nowhere else to go, the helpless pensioners appeal to the newly formed Union of Cossacks, who in turn appeal to the federal government for action in the region. The two volumes of *Belaia kniga, Chechnia, 1991-1995: fakts, dokumenty, svidetel'stva* [*The White Book*],[36] released by the same organization, predictable tells a very similar story (albeit without the provocative cover art: it is plain white, as you might guess). Here, the historian who gives an account of the region argues that the present military operation was not imperialist because Russians in Chechnya were an oppressed group who were kicked out of the territory where they had lived for hundreds of years, and so forced into a position of indefinite homelessness. The editors once again employ letters from Russian pensioners to document the truth of the historian's claim. Also included are charts of industrial and agricultural production from Chechnya, which demonstrate the complete failure of the economy since Dudaev took power.

The rhetoric employed by the Russian Intelligence Service and Ministry of Defense is especially enlightening when we consider alongside it an article in the liberal journal, *Zvezda*, the organ of the Russian Writers' Union in Petersburg. Predictably, the editorial staff of the journal took a strong stance against military involvement in the North Caucasus and ran a series of three articles over the course of 1995 and 1996. Historians wrote the first and third installations, in which they contextualized the "imperialist" wars of the nineteenth century as implicit forerunners of the present conflict. The debate about history is very clear when we consider this alongside the government-released pamphlets. The North Caucasus region has existed as a particular challenge to Russian imperial expansion and now, as empires fall *because* they are

[36] Tsentr obshchestvennykh sviazei FSK, eds., *Belaia kniga, Chechnia, 1991-1994: fakts, dokumenty, svidetel'stva* (Moscow: Tsentr, 1995). Interestingly enough, the Russian intelligence service, FSK, used the same title for this pamphlet as another book of "documents" released by the KGB in 1980 about a Zionist conspiracy.

empires, the Russian state futilely attempts to maintain its *imperial* boundaries. This assumption about imperial legacy is unquestioned within the articles about history. At the beginning of the articles, we find a note from the editor, which discusses the "psychological effect on Russian society" of the nineteenth-century imperialist wars. The editor essentially agrees with Yeltsin in his statement about "imperial thinking," and the notion of an ethno-imperial character of the Russian people, handed down from an earlier generation.[37] But we need to keep in mind the structure of this debate between official sources and the liberal literary establishment. At the center of both arguments is the notion of imperialism, and how Russians are victimized, either in the absence of a strong Russian state (the claim that these actions are anti-imperial), or because of imperialism itself (the liberal argument, which condemns so-called imperial activity).

In the second article, published in *Zvezda*, "*Nabliudeniia i razmyshleniia ochevidtsa* [A Witness's Observations and Thoughts]," in December 1995, we find our quintessential victim and citizen, whom we have already met in the government-issued publications above. *Zvezda* published the diary of Georgii Passarar, a retired artist and former Russian resident of Grozny, and a pensioner with a sick wife.[38] When the air raid began in November, his home was immediately destroyed, and he had to seek refuge with his Chechen neighbor. Eventually, he escaped with his family to southern Russia. G. Lisitsyna, an academic at the European University in Petersburg, tells us in the introduction to Passarar's diary that the artist and his Chechen savior met again in a Petersburg train station, where they were both homeless

[37] L.M. Serebriakov, "Mysli o delakh nashikh na kavkaze," *Zvezda* 12 (Dec. 1996), 87-109.

[38] The name, Passarar, is obviously not of Russian origin. In assigning him a Russian identity, however, the author only means to suggest that he was part of the Russian-speaking community in Chechnya, as opposed to the Chechen-speaking majority.

refugees.[39] In both the government-issued pamphlets and in the highbrow liberal media, we find the same type of victim, with perhaps the same basic audience in mind.

I find Passarar's designation as an "artist" significant, however, because it is the only feature that places him recognizably in the context of a literary journal. His role as an "artist" attaches him to a discourse about the importance of high culture in defining a specific community. Passarar's fate as a homeless refugee along with his Chechen savior in St. Petersburg reinforces the notion that the state, while represented by the fixed space of the traditional imperial center, exists in opposition to the more organic union that the two victims cultivated. The state's enmity with the nation's representatives of high culture actually causes the cultured individual to identify with the state's supposed enemy.

Apart from the placeless victim theme present in both the official publications and journal articles, the question of Russia's imperial legacy also establishes common ground in the debate. Lisitsyna and Gorlov accept the idea of imperialism, and to a certain extent, Russia's past, as something that is unwise to emulate in the new nation-building project. Both individuals accept this project as self-evidently a factor in the "normalization" of the RF, and its integration into Europe. This integration would include the participation of *citizens*, which implies that this term is *nationally* understood as participation in both the private and public spheres, with the former the most prominent of the two (everyday life, and its subsequent disruption, is emphasized in both accounts of the victim). The space of Chechnya, in relation to "Russia," represents an element of the past that makes Russia and the Russian people very *different* from what they should be in the modern world. The quintessential victim in this discourse is an allusion to the placeless imaginary of cultural myth in that the artist and pensioner exist in

[39] G. Lisitsyna, introduction to Georgii Passarar, "Nabliudeniia i razmyshleniia ochevidtsa," *Zvezda* 3 (1995), 137.

opposition to the idea of an unchanging state. While this opposition does not serve as an ideal community in the text, primarily because its creation is predicated on the actions of an imperialist state, the authors nonetheless assign historically and culturally recognizable identities onto the victims. The authors' idealization of citizenship is at odds with their deliberate manipulation of these identities, which indicates their difficulty with reconciling historical problems with contemporary issues.

Yegor Gaidar, the deputy Prime Minister and acting Prime Minister under the early Yeltsin administration, was keenly aware of the problems of Russian history in establishing a normal state.[40] In the final chapter of his memoir, written as a grim conclusion to an era filled with hope for democratic change, Gaidar states that, "Ever since that time [1991], development in that republic [Chechnya] had been closely intertwined with the fate of reforms and democracy in Russia. At first, when Chechnya was still only on the periphery of public attention, this link was less obvious, but later it became even more visible and alarming."[41] Gaidar was fundamentally opposed to the use of force in the region, drawing heavily on the history of tsarist and Stalinist oppression in the region. While he writes that "Chechnya is unlike other parts of Russia," the implication is that Russia is unlike other parts of the Western world, because of this threat to Russia's normalization.[42] Gaidar complains that he tried to organize protests against the war, but the public was not interested. He views the conflict in Chechnya as an enigma, something unexplainable in terms of political logic. In the end, he blames public apathy, which

[40] Before Yeltsin appointed him the deputy Prime Minister in 1992, Gaidar was a basically unknown figure in politics. He began his career in journalism, as the economics editor of *Kommunist* and *Pravda*. After his radical plan for privatization lost support in the Duma at the end of 1992, Yeltsin removed him from the position, and Gaidar formed his own political party, Russia's Democratic Choice (or just Russia's Choice), which failed miserably in the 1993 election and even worse in 1995. Today, he is primarily known in the RF as the promoter of "shock therapy" economic in Russia. Gaidar wrote his memoir, *Days of Defeat and Victory*, between January and July 1996, during the period of uncertain peace in Chechnya. See Jane Ann Miller, introduction to Egor Gaidar, *Days of Defeat and Victory*, tr. Miller (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

[41] Gaidar, *Days of Defeat and Victory*, 276.

[42] Ibid., 278.

allowed the government to "act recklessly."[43] Although this is not a narrative of victimization in the literal sense of the previous two examples, Gaidar alludes to the problem of failed citizenship in his discussion of Chechnya, which is the result of a foreign object stopping the progress of Russian nation-building.

Perhaps less ambiguous is Mikhail Leontev's[44] column in the 15 December 1994 issue of the daily newspaper *Segodnia*, entitled "What the Hell is Chechnya to Us? [*Na khrena nam eta Chechnia*]," in which he writes,

> The second [approach for dealing with Chechnya], which so far the Russian political establishment is in no way mature enough for, is the principle of the nation-state [*natsional'noe gosudarstvo*]. The point of the downfall of the Soviet empire was not to preserve another, "diluted" empire at any price; it was that, for the first time in Russian history, we have a chance to build a Russian—a Russo-cultural—nation-state on the basis of our own national values. What we are going through now is essentially a process of putting together the Russian nation, a process that is fated to continue until we finally get our own nation-state. This principle and this policy are the only effective antidote for the imperial infection that has thoroughly poisoned our national organism. We cannot, and we certainly do not want to, get involved in organizing the internal system in Chechnya. We do not want to sacrifice the lives of our soldiers in order to disarm the 'bad' Chechens and arm the 'good' ones. They are all simply alien to us.[45]

When attempting to deal with the question of who is to be included into an idea of the new Russian state, the previous authors all deal with the problems of history as they relate to the everyday life of the present. If history represents a fundamental problem in the construction of a national identity of the Russian Federation, due to general opposition to the idea of imperialism and totalitarian communism, then Western models of citizenship also present a problem because of its lack of historical development in a Russian context. What Gaidar points out, as did many

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[43] Ibid., 283.

[44] Leontev was the general editor of *Segodnia* [*Today*], which is owned by media magnate and banker Vladimir Gusinskii, between 1993-1996. In 1997, Leontev began hosting the Russian Public Television program "Na samom dele [In Actual Fact]," and after that another television show, "Odnako [However]," both of which dealt with specifically political and economic issues affecting contemporary Russia. He received the "Golden Feather of Russia" journalism award in 1999.

[45] Mikhail Leont'ev, "Na khrena nam eta Chechnia," *Segodnia* 15 Dec. 1994, 3.

liberals during this period, is the irreconcilability of public apathy with a meaningful concept of citizenship. At the same time, Gaidar, Lisitsyna, and Gorlov did not reconcile this position with their consistent allusion to an allegory of everyday life as the building blocks of the same nation-building, or normalization, project. Thus, if this allegory is inconsistent with history, and both are inconsistent with their own ideas about citizenship, the authors are actually dealing with the problem of viewing themselves as different, without necessarily being able to articulate a normative standard to answer the question: Different from what or whom? Of course, we find numerous attempts to find this elusive standard, from the liberal idea of American or Western European democracy, to "Eurasianism," or Russian ethno-nationalism on the other side of the political spectrum.

But outside of this debate about standards, from which to construct a national idea, we find another series of responses to the debate about empire and nation during the Chechen War. These critiques of the dominant ideology, which were present in the polemics of literary journals, in addition to the cinema, admit the problems of finding such a standard, and in certain cases attempted to discover an alternative means of articulating the public's relationship to the state than through questions of national or ethnic identities.

Imagining imperialism in the Russian Federation

Eduard Volodin's article "Russo-Chechen Syndrome," published in the June 1995 issue of *Molodaia gvardiia*, is a strange and ambiguous addition to the debate about imperialism in the RF during the war in Chechnya.[46] The article in question, which is blatantly anti-war for many of the same reasons Mikhail Leontev gives in the article quoted above, is striking for its simultaneous expression of statist nationalism.[47] Volodin argues that the conflict, which he refers to as "Yeltsin's war," is merely an exercise of raw power, which has never benefited anyone: "This war is equally anti-national for Russia as for Chechnya. Neither Russians nor Chechens gain anything from it, except the death of their sons, bitterness, and descent into poverty."[48]

Volodin initially expresses his critique of empire through association of the term with Dudaev. He sees the Chechen leader essentially as a colonizing force in the region. According to Volodin, Dudaev took power from a local and independent government in the autonomous republic. Thus, in form, Volodin predictably accepts the pseudo-federal structure of the Soviet Union and, we assume, the attempts to make these principles a reality in the Russian Federation.[49] Later we find the term "*melkotravchatyi*" nationalism, a term the author apparently coined himself that literally means "fine grass," but which we might interpret as "light-weight"

[46] Volodin, who died at the end of 2001, was a former professor at the Russian Academy of Sciences, who quit during perestroika and aligned himself with the newly reconstituted Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) as an advisor to its leader, Gennady Ziuganov. In 1991, he co-chaired with Ziuganov the Coordination Council of People's Patriotic Forces in Russia, a communist/nationalist opposition movement in the State Duma. See Volodin's obituary, Russkoe voskesenie, *Kolonka kommentatora*, 12 Dec. 2001, internet on-line, <http://www.voskres.ru/kolonka/index.htm>, [12 May 2002].

[47] See fn.17 above.

[48] Eduard Volodin, "Russko-Chechenskii sindrom," *Molodaia gvardiia* 6 (1995), 22.

[49] See my comments above (fn.13) on Soviet Nationality Policy, and the territorialization of ethnicity in the Soviet Union.

with additional connotations of provincialism or a lack of sophistication.[50] Volodin uses the term to describe not only ideologists of regional separatism like Dudaev, but also politicians in Yeltsin's government. Finally, in his own position as co-founder of the "patriotic opposition" movement, he attempts to denounce the Yeltsin government as a group of "blind-patriots." He argues that these politicians tried to justify the war under the auspices of "national interests of the Russian Federation," but they had no political vision, and the Yeltsin government was responsible for merely "supporting those people who want to bring misery to Russia [i.e., separatist leaders, neo-Bolsheviks, the mafia, etc.]."

Volodin asks, "Will a [another] standard be set?"

> Not once did these patriots talk enthusiastically about the Great Russian people or about the Great Russian Empire… In reality, the "New Imperialists" [of Yeltsin's administration] slipped from the Great Russian tradition to *melkotravchatyi* nationalism, and it is not at all better or worse than regional nationalism. With only that distinction, that regional nationalism was, is, and will be *regional*, secondary, *melkotravchatyi*, the nationalism of the blind-patriots vulgarizes and brings us down to the level of Ukrainian village separatism.[51]

The national principles, and the ideal community, to which he alludes in the article are fixed in opposition to Yeltsin's "imperialism," but they nonetheless remain abstractions. "The Great Russian tradition" that Volodin mentions is implicitly an idea of high culture because of his negative association with the unsophisticated, and *modern*, nation-building projects of Yeltsin and Dudaev. In his attempt to positively identify culture and tradition with the historical state, and thus identify an idea of the nation with the Russian Empire, Volodin's ideas flounder, and both of these associations appear empty.

[50] Thanks to Ol'ga Maiorova for helping me understand this term.
[51] Eduard Volodin, "Russko-Chechenskii sindrom," *Molodaia gvardiia* 6 (1995), 28-30.

One could argue that the author is merely establishing common ground with opponents of the Dudaev regime, which additionally predicates opposition to the current political elite. The implications of such a rhetorical gesture, however, deliberately questions the author's ability to represent any public whatsoever, because he still couches his argument in pro-imperial *and pro-nationalist* sentiments. It is virtually impossible to pull from this article a consistent political or social idea, since the author identifies his opponents as patriots, nationalists, and imperialists, which are all categories with which he himself identifies. Thus, "The Russo-Chechen Syndrome," which Volodin never once addresses in the body of the article, is ultimately self-reflexive and indicative of an intellectual malaise, the victims of which suffer from an inability to communicate with a public living in new social and political circumstances. The author finds it difficult to sort out the contradictions of his own ideological message because the ideas with which he seemingly agrees are also those he transfers to the state in the form of critique.[52]

While Volodin's simultaneous conflation and disintegration of categories of nation and empire attempted to dispute the historical idea of high culture as an oppositionary power to the state, Sergei Bodrov most explicitly approached this idea as a self-conscious myth in his award-winning film, *Kavkazskii plennik* [Prisoner of the Caucasus; English title: *Prisoner of the Mountains*] (1996).[53] The allusion to the placeless imaginary of cultural and literary myth is obvious when we consider that the title itself is identical to three works of nineteenth-century Russian literature: First, to the Pushkin and Lermontov poems, written in 1822 and 1828, respectively, and then to Tolstoy's short story published in 1870. In these earlier works of poetry

[52] The "Russo-Chechen Syndrome" also alludes to a previous social malady called the "Afghan Syndrome," which referred to soldiers returning from the Soviet war in Afghanistan, who found it difficult to adapt to civilian life. The syndrome described the combined effect of a meaningless war and indifferent society on the lives of the veterans. For an account in English of the "Afghan Syndrome," and its Chechen equivalent, see Daniel Williams, "Russian Troops Face 'Chechnya Syndrome'," *Washington Post* 6 Aug. 2000.

[53] *Kavkazskii plennik*, prod. Boris Giller, dir. Sergei Bodrov, written by Arif Aliev, Bodrov, and Giller, BG/Caravan JSC, 1996, film.

and short fiction, the nobleman, serving in the military during the conquest of the Caucasus, is the model of the Russian victim. While traveling through the mountains, the natives capture him and hold him for ransom. In the course of his captivity, however, the Russian makes friends with a village girl, who helps him escape, after which the story ends. Although the basic plot points remain consistent, the authors' feelings about imperial expansion differ slightly in each literary work. Nonetheless, throughout the course of these works, the writers position the Russian protagonist as more a victim of circumstance than of the savagery of the native peoples. Thus, while not overtly critical of the state, the writers entered into a dialogue with the state in the literary works about the meaning and viability of imperialism.

Bodrov's film is an interesting comment on literary history and the issues of imperialism that previous writers were dealing with, while self-consciously remaining outside an attachment to the thematic content of any of the works specifically. Nonetheless, Bodrov most closely follows the plot line of the Tolstoy story, using the same character Zhilin as the protagonist, in addition to Dina as the Chechen girl, whom he befriends, and Kostylin as the other soldier in captivity in the village. Consequently, Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Caucasus* literally invites comparison with the earlier works, and all that they continued to represent in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Due to its apparent anti-war message, and sleek Hollywood style, the film received extremely positive international recognition. *Kavkazskii plennik* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1997, and won Best Film at the San Diego International Film Festival. In addition, the three writers of the screenplay, Bodrov, Arif Aliev, and Boris Giller, won the Outstanding Single Achievement Award at the European Film Awards in 1996, and despite the negative response from critics in the major Moscow dailies for overuse of tired

literary allusions and Hollywood clichés, *Kavkazskii plennik* won Best Film at both of the domestic film festivals, Sochi, and Nika.

Thus, apart from the literary trope of the "Prisoner of the Caucasus" itself, we must also consider how it functions as a canonical reference in the Soviet period, in addition to the mid-nineties. Very soon after Socialist Realism was officially adopted in literature (during the 1934 Writers' Congress), Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Lermontov were all heralded as models for contemporary prose (despite the fact that Pushkin and Lermontov were primarily known for poetry), and their works were taught in every elementary school throughout the USSR. The state issued enormous print runs of their collected works, rivaling Lenin, and they became part of official Soviet culture, alongside contemporary Socialist Realist writers. Due to their official status, the literary underground in the seventies and eighties took a particularly hostile attitude toward these writers, either trying to ignore them, or parodying the romanticism of Pushkin and Lermontov, in addition to the Realism of Tolstoy and his imitators in the Soviet Writers' Union. The nationalist and liberal writers, meanwhile, attempted to "re-"appropriate them, according to their own ideological platforms.

During the more recent conflict in Chechnya, it was once again the government who attempted to use the "Prisoner" theme, in order to contextualize the war and give it meaning. For example, an article appeared in *Krasnaia zvezda* [*The Red Star*], just prior to the Grozny air raid with the headline, "Russian is not a 'Prisoner of the Caucasus.' She [Russia] is obliged to look after her own interests." A month later, the same newspaper published a Lermontov commemoration, highlighting his numerous works of fiction and poetry about the Caucasus.[54] And, as Susan Layton points out in *Russian Literature and Empire*, this extensive literary

[54] *Krasnaia zvezda*, "Rossiia – ne 'Kavkazskaia plennitsa.' Ona obiazana otctaivat' svoi interesy," 23 Aug. 1994; "Lermontov: literaturnaia zhizn' v Kavkaze," 14 Oct. 1994

tradition concerning the Caucasus remains the primary source of knowledge for Russians about the region and Russian imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, regardless of the position taken on it.[55]

Harsha Ram interprets Bodrov's *Kavkazskii plennik* as embodying similar themes as the earlier works of literature, and thus implies that the filmmaker too succumbed to a banal national expression of the placeless imaginary. She explains the plot in terms of the traditional opposition between ideas of nation, represented by the quintessential victim, and the imperial center: "Disavowed by the political center yet unwelcome in the colonial periphery, the Russian body seeks a homecoming, in order to dwell within the national memory. Abandoned by the empire, it must achieve its repatriation by other means."[56] While Bodrov intentionally put himself firmly within this official discourse about the "Prisoner of the Caucasus," he nonetheless consistently denied the film's relation to this discourse in his public statements and interviews he gave. In answer to film critic Valeriia Pritulenko's question about the obvious connections to Tostoy's story, Bodrov answers,

> I think that Tolstoy's story was simpler and more brilliant: They take two prisoners in order to sell them… But I can't allow myself now, when the picture calls to mind an association with the Chechen War, to shoot a story about how one side [of the conflict] takes prisoners and sells them. This means to be completely on the other side. I can't allow myself to do that. I'm closer to the plot line of exchange.[57]

This "plot line of exchange" refers to the fact that Abdul-Murat, the Chechen village elder in the film (who is also in this role in Tolstoy's story), arranged the capture of the Russian soldiers, not for monetary ransom, but to arrange the release of his own son being held as a prisoner of war. Furthermore, Tolstoy's story does not appear in the credits, and not only because of its politically

[55] Layton, 13.
[56] Ram, "Prisoners of the Caucasus," 28.
[57] Sergei Bodrov, "Ia khotel sdelat' gumanuiu kartinu," interview with Valeriia Pritulenko, *Iskusstvo kino* 6 (1996): 11.

incorrect meaning. Bodrov denies the existence of the prisoner discourse entirely, merely drawing attention to the hodgepodge of meanings in the "Prisoner" literature. Bodrov predictably wants to distance himself completely from political affiliation. In an amusing exchange, Pritulenko asks him, "So, imperial consciousness is alien to you?" to which the filmmaker answers, "Yes, it is completely alien to me." He then goes on to deny all political affiliations, stating that the film is, in fact, universal. Of course *Kavkazskii plennik* has a generic anti-war message, but this alone does not explain why it attaches itself so topically to Tolstoy. Perhaps, the film is then a critique of itself, or at least a denial of the myth with which it attaches itself. Hinting at this, Pritulenko says, "But nonetheless you shot the film in the Caucasus, as you explained during a press-conference. You said, 'Imperial consciousness is alien to me…' and us, critics, happily nodded. Not an imperial consciousness, but an imperial unconscious."[58]

Whether he is entirely serious or not, Pritulenko fails to account for such a deliberate and self-conscious connection to the earlier text, and takes for granted the hidden layers of Bodrov's own Russian psychology. But Pritulenko's statement is nonetheless informative about the playful nature of the younger generation of the literary elite in their contribution to the debate about imperialism. For Pritulenko, the accusation of imperial consciousness is an empty signifier, only indicating the discourse itself, in the same way that Bodrov does in the film. Andrei Plakhov, who attempts to dispel the harsh criticism of *Kavkazskii plennik* for its dual reference to the classics and imitation of Hollywood conventions, argues that Bodrov only begins with literary myths, but ends by dispelling them: "The cleverness of the film lies in the fact that it shows this meta-historical magma as if it were a still-living exotica but by the same token, it throws the bridge over on this archaic cultural myth."[59] Thus, the topical connection to Russian

[58] Ibid., 13.
[59] Andrei Plakhov, "Plennik gory, zalozhnik uspekha," *Iskusstvo kino* 6 (1996), 7.

myth and present reality is the only characteristic of the film that gives it a specifically Russian context. *Kavkazskii plennik* is a "post-national" film because it uses previously meaningful concepts only as a way of pointing out their failures to explain the present conflict. I believe that we must accept Bodrov's statement that the film is "universal." In its positive meaning, *Kavkazskii plennik* is nothing more and nothing less than a simple moral tale about the atrocities of war. Thus, the film is also an evasion of the discourse about nation and empire.

The debate about imperialism, or more specifically, opposition to imperialism, becomes a way of explaining the state in relation to an imagined Russian nation. But what we see emerging during the conflict in Chechnya is the inability of this debate to make sense of the war. We see the contradictions in this debate most clearly in Volodin's article about an unstated "Russo-Chechen Syndrome," and then Bodrov's film is a plea to get beyond narcissistically-conceived identities (whether through self-love or self-hatred) by pointing out their superficialities in post-Soviet space.

Imagining culture and history in the new Russia

If the national "we" is an ineffective post-Soviet response to the idea of imperialism, then Bodrov also implicates the idea of Russian culture as it is conceived in the literary/historical framework. This was not a new idea in the mid-nineties, however, as intellectuals and writers like Nikolai Rachkov had written extensively about the extreme pessimism in Russian society during the late Gorbachev era and the early nineties. Rachkov was especially aware of and frightened by Russians' indifference to the cultural past. He argues that Russians need to begin to love themselves again and start to value their land and cultural traditions. The difference between Rachkov's officious statement and the message in Bodrov's film is that the poet is still looking toward cultural mythologies for the rebirth of an imagined Russian nation. At the same

time, the filmmaker has already decided that these expressions have been entirely ineffective in accomplishing anything for Russians of the past, and seem unlikely to do so in the present, and is certainly no model for the future.

The other important contribution to the "Prisoner of the Caucasus" trope during the recent conflict in Chechnya is Vladimir Makanin's "Kavkazskii plennyi," a short story published in the September 1994 issue of the liberal journal *Novyi mir*. The story is set in the period before the full-scale invasion of Grozny in November. Although keeping the same title,[60] the story is quite different topically and thematically from both the "Prisoner" tradition of the nineteenth century and Bodrov's film. Makinin nonetheless comments more directly and extensively on the mythologies that comprise the placeless imaginary than the filmmaker. Once again, the narrative concerns two soldiers in the North Caucasus, whose primary mission in the region is not entirely clear. In this story, however, the question of captivity is initially reversed, as it is the Russian soldiers who capture a Chechen rebel. But this reversal is strictly topical, as the basic theme of the story is an allegory of Russian captivity, and the limitations of politics and ideology that manifest themselves in the daily lives of the soldiers. In many ways, Makanin's story is more of a comment on the ways the Soviet state appropriated the literary tradition and subsumed it under the rubric of socialist realism. "Kavkazskii plennyi" is thus an acknowledgement that literature must contend with its complicity with the state, rather than attach itself to a grand tradition of opposition, which many liberal intellectuals imagined themselves doing in the mid-nineties.[61]

[60] Makanin's title contains one small difference from the others in that he uses the modern word for prisoner, "*plennyi*," rather than the obsolete and literary term, "*plennik*".

[61] See the discussion of Lisitsina and the Passarar piece above.

The story initially plays on the literary conventions and clichés of nineteenth century representations of the region, which first positions the protagonists in opposition to the state's enemy (i.e., the Chechen rebel), but later identifies the protagonists with the enemy, and opposition is transferred to the state. Thus, the standard interpretation of the literary myth of the Caucasus is that the conflict problematizes the citizen's (who always appears as a victim without a fixed home) identification with the state and, in so doing, the myth establishes an alternative category, in which participants of the cultural elite could identify themselves as Russian. Here, however, the state appears from the beginning as a shadowy organization, simultaneously selling arms to the Chechen rebels, and then ordering the soldiers to disarm them. The protagonists never identify themselves with the state, and consequently never shift their identification to the noble savage of mountains. As an allegory, then, Makanin's "Kavkazskii plennyi" questions the existence of civil society because the victim does not gain self-consciousness of his condition, and cannot participate in a dialogue with the state. Instead, the author uses cultural identities as pieces of de-contextualized phatic conversation. Thus, the reader enters Makanin's story with the expectations of the "prisoner" myth, but which is shattered for its inability to explain the recent conflict.

"Kavkazskii plennyi begins with the protagonists, Rubakhin[62] and the rifleman Vovka, returning from a failed mission to retrieve military personnel, which had previously lodged in a gorge. Upon reporting to their commanding officer at his lavish home in the Chechen countryside, the Russian soldiers are ordered to help his wife with gardening. While Rubakhin proceeds to the Colonel's immaculately manicured lawn to plant flowers, Vovka sneak off to the home of a neighboring Chechen girl.

[62] Rubakhin's name in Russian means, "straight," or "straight-laced".

Eventually he returns to Rubakhin with information that a Lieutenant Savkin is organizing a disarmament operation, and the two escape Colonel Gurov's garden to join the group, in anticipation that they will be able to capture a Chechen prisoner. The irony is that while they leave for this mission, Gurov is having tea with a leader of the Russian-supported Chechen opposition, Alibekov, and discussing an arms deal. Alibekov tells Gurov that all Russians are "prisoners of the Caucasus," provoking Gurov to reminisce about his past and the romantic associations that the East used to conjure in his mind. In between singing verses from a popular Russian folk song from the seventies, Alibekov comments off-handedly that Chechens needed to emigrate to the West like the Russians. The intertextuality in this passage is fairly striking because it is the Chechen who draws the Russian's attention to not only the "Prisoner of the Caucasus" theme in Russian literature, but also the nineteenth-century trope of pilgrimage to the West (Alibekov uses the verb "*khodit',*" which means to go by foot), while referencing popular culture of the recent past. Gurov, meanwhile, can only consider the loss of a meaningful context in which to place these experiences.

The story itself begins with another deconstructed textual reference, this time to the famous line in Dostoevskii's *The Idiot*, "Beauty saves the world." In Dostoevskii's novel, we never see the original context of the utterance, only the atheist Ippolit's question to Prince Myshkin, the Christ-like figure, concerning whether or not he truly believed that beauty would save the world. Ippolit claims that Myshkin only said this because he was in love with a woman, while the Prince himself declines to respond either to the validity of the accusation or to the statement in general. Makanin, then, introduces his "Kavkazskii plennyi" with the line, "The soldiers did not know that 'beauty saves the world,' but in general they knew that there was such

a thing as beauty."[63] This is a theme permeating the story, and which comes back at the end. Beauty is only seen, but not understood or comprehended. Beauty is dangerous and the protagonist, Rubakhin, must constantly remain on his guard for it.

During the disarmament operation (in which only Rubakhin is allowed to participate, while Vovka is weeded out for not looking tough enough), the Russian soldiers ambush a group of Chechen rebels, and Rubakhin captures an unarmed teenager, whom he intends to bring to Gurov and thus redeem himself. But instead of his masculinity affirmed in military service, the prisoner narrative unfolds as an ambiguous homosexual encounter. The prisoner is constantly revealed through Rubakhin's eyes as a female equivalent. He gets closer and closer to the boy, almost nursing him. At the same time, Rubakhin becomes intensely attracted to him sexually, but is not consciously aware of this happening to him. He repeatedly reassures his Chechen prisoner that he will not be kept in prison. The Russian military merely want him for an as yet undetermined exchange with the rebel fighters. Eventually, two small groups of Chechen rebels walk by the path that Rubakhin, Vovka, and the prisoner are traveling. They manage to hide in the bushes, while a Russian arms shipment arrives in trucks from the other direction. A confrontation ensues, during which the rebels ambush the Russian trucks, while the Russian commander claims that they are empty. Rubakhin tries to silence the prisoner, but fears he will yell out and finds no other option than to strangle the boy to death. He subsequently falls sleeps and dreams about the prisoner he has just killed. But the specific nature of his beauty leaves him and he is left with a general and non-descript image in his head, while nonetheless waking up sexually aroused.

While the theme of unavoidable, but nonetheless senseless, violence in the final confrontation between Rubakhin and the Chechen boy is a thinly-veiled allegory for the macro-

[63] Vladimir Makanin, "Kavkazskii plennyi," *Novyi mir* 9 (1994), 3.

conflict, the idea of beauty in Makanin's "Kavkazskii plennyi" and its reference to identifiable literary and historical tropes explains how this critique of aggression works in a broader post-Soviet context. The statement, "Beauty saves the world" implies that something transcendent will justify the ordinary of everyday life. In the story, however, beauty itself becomes ordinary and fleeting. There is nothing of the noble savage in the character of the Chechen boy; he is merely week and fairly unintelligent, while possessing an empty outward beauty. Makanin evokes the beauty and foreignness of the Chechen landscape, so familiar to the literary tradition, but de-nationalizes the comparison between Russian and Caucasian space. In the end, the landscape is either nothing more than incomprehensible, or the elusive battlefield of the Chechen rebels. Makanin does not accuse the soldiers of not understanding beauty, but merely makes beauty a part of the everyday.

* * *

Iurii Arabov, the Moscow screenwriter, apparently arrived at this conclusion independently of Makanin in his critique of the liberal position on the war. He reverses the Dostoevskian statement of "Beauty will save the world" to "The world will save beauty,"[64] which is essentially a critique of a Russian propensity to imitate literature as an expression of cultural or national consciousness. In his article, "Be Careful, the Doors Are Closing"[65] in the February 1995 issue of *Iskusstvo kino* [*Cinema Art*], Arabov discusses the problems with how the debate about the Chechen War played itself out. He argues that the liberals, just as much as the nationalists, were responsible for misunderstanding the war because they could only conceive of it in terms of rehearsed cultural models. Arabov describes the origins of Russian political and cultural consciousness in terms of a literary consciousness, but approaches such a placeless

[64] Iurii Arabov, "Ostorozhno, dveri zakryvaiutsia," *Iskusstvo kino* 2 (1995), 13.

[65] "Ostorozhno, dveri zakryvaiutsia" is the recorded voice in the Moscow subway that warns passengers to step away from the doors.

imaginary quite ironically. In the present context, he argues that the literary-ness of the debates gives the conflict a "deeply farcical and comical character": Liberals intellectuals were seen offering themselves as hostages to Dudaev in an attempt to artificially manufacture victimization, and thus reproduce not only the category of the noble savage, but also the ethnic Russian in his necessary opposition to the state.[66]

Arabov also details the ways in which Dudaev himself manipulated these categories. His own wife, Alla, was a lyrical poet and painter, who created romantic scenes of the Chechen countryside and wrote poems about her first love. During the war, she began to paint Dudaev against the backdrop of the Caucasus Mountains, which Arabov argues was provided for the liberal intelligentsia to reinforce their own self-perceptions. He claims that the intelligentsia will fail in their ability to change politics because of their misguided moralism, based on a "literary consciousness." Ultimately, Arabov unquestionably supports independence for Chechnya because "their ambition need not stretch out all across Russia. But the matter [he states] is not only in the ambitions of the Caucasus peoples, but also in our Russian guilt in relation to them."[67] Arabov claims that this expression of guilt is at the root of the conflict, because it reproduces identity in opposition to the state, and thus alleviates responsibility in those who place themselves in this community.

Arabov's article is interesting for its comment on how a peculiar national consciousness is created in a simultaneous identification with, and opposition to, the state. After all, the intellectuals who eagerly awaited their time as Prisoners of the Caucasus were themselves members of the Council of Peoples' Deputies. Their actions illustrated a particular form of participation in the political system, based on a fetishized idea of national consciousness.

[66] Arabov, 4.
[67] Ibid., 7.

Arabov concludes, however, with another literary allusion, stating that the "simple people were ready for independence" in a way that the intelligentsia was not.[68] The reason he gives for this solution to the problem of national consciousness based on the placeless imaginary of literary and cultural myth is that the "simple people" were engaged with "everyday life [*byt*]." While his prediction that the RF was leading down the road to democracy might have been premature, especially when we consider the second war in the Caucasus, which began in 2000 under Vladimir Putin's administration, Arabov's argument positions everyday life in opposition to national consciousness, and interestingly privileges the former as the building blocks for participatory democracy. We might justifiably interpret this statement, along with many of the anxieties that characterized the attitudes of politicians like Gaidar about questions of citizenship, as an attempt to get beyond grand categories of nation and empire in order to establish new channels of participation in government and social life.

[68] Ibid., 12.