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Literary Myths and Media Representations
of the Chechen Conflict***

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Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies
Working Paper Series

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Summer 1999

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Edited by Anna Wertz
BPS gratefully acknowledges support from the
National Security Education Program for providing funding for the publication of this Working Paper

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In renaming his breakaway nation the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1994, the late separatist leader Dzhokhar Dudaev couched a bold declaration of political independence in terms of a humbler gesture of literary homage. The toponym Ichkeria appears in the work of the Russian romantic writer Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841), whom Dudaev had often acknowledged to be his favorite poet. Zelimkhan Iandarbiev, another Chechen writer-politician of the nineties, begins an article of 1995 with the admission that his first contact with Russia began with the “great Russian poets” of the Soviet school curriculum. The same article concludes with Iandarbiev’s anathemization of Russia in verse - “You were unwashed, and remain unwashed” - that echoes the first verse of Lermontov’s celebrated denunciatory poem “Farewell unwashed Russia,” (“Proshchai nemytaia Rossiia,” 1841), written as the poet was departing from St. Petersburg on his final journey to the Caucasus.¹

These two post-Soviet citations of Lermontov point to a wider cultural debt, shared (however differently) by Russian and Chechen, that deserves to be scrutinized more carefully. The persistence of the nineteenth-century Russian classics, and their redeployment in the polemics surrounding the recent Chechen war of 1994-1996, should not surprise anyone familiar with the Northern Caucasus and its attendant cultural symbolism. Russian literary representations of the Northern Caucasus reach back at least to the romantic poets of the early nineteenth century which, in the absence of reportage from the frontline, acquired a singular importance to readers of the time. As Thomas Barrett has observed, “Russian imperial encroachments on other peoples of the East never produced the emotional attachment or created heroes the way they did in the Caucasus, largely because there was no such literary landscape in Central Asia or the Far East.”²

¹ Zelimkhan Iandarbiev, “Moe postizhenie Rossii” (written April 1995), *Chechenia - Bitva za sovobodu* (Lviv: Svoboda narodiv, 1996), 438-41. The Russian is “Nemytoi byla ty, ostalas’ nemytoi.” Lermontov’s poem “Proshchai nemytaia Rossiia,” (1841) can be found in M. Iu. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4 tomakh*, (Moscow/Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1962), vol. 1, 524. The geographical term Ichkeria appears in Lermontov’s poem “Valerik” (1840), vol. 1, 524, where it appears to designate a mountainous region that does not encompass all of Chechnya, and indeed is described as “distant” from it, although the poet emphasizes the political solidarity between the two regions. I have been informed by Lyoma Usmanov that the choice of Ichkeria by Dudaev was a provisional and polemical one; he also doubts that Lermontov was the only or primary source for the term, although others believe differently.

² Thomas M. Barrett, “The Remaking of the Lion of Dagestan; Shamil in Captivity,” *The Russian Review* 53 (July 1994): 360; cf. also Barrett’s “Southern Living (in Captivity): The Caucasus in Russian Popular Culture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31 (Spring 1998): 75-93. A useful anthology of Russian poetic texts on the Caucasus is B.A. Boichenko, ed., *Kavkaz v russkoi poëzii* (Rostov on Donu: Izdatel’stvo Rostovskogo universiteta, 1986). There is now a small but suggestive body of writing in English on the literary and cultural processes in Russia that attended the conquest of the Caucasus: see Susan Layton, “Primitive Despot and Noble Savage: the Two Faces of Shamil in Russian Literature,” *Central Asian Survey* 10 (1991): 31-45; Peter Scotto, “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism in Lermontov’s ‘Bela’,” *PMLA* 107 (March 1992): 246-60; Monika Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion. Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) a collection of three articles appearing in *Russian Review* 53 (July 1994) with the opening statement by Alfred J. Rieber, “Russian Imperialism: Popular, Emblematic, Ambiguous” (331-335); see in particular Katya Hokanson, “Literary Imperialism, *Narodnost’* and Pushkin’s Invention of the Caucasus” (336-352); Susan Layton, “A Russian Reverie: Chechnya’s Literary Legacy” *History Today* 47 (February 1997): 6-9, and Harsha Ram, “Russian Poetry and the Imperial Sublime,” in *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation and the Culture of the Golden Age*, ed. Monika Greenleaf and Stephen Moeller Sally, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 21-49.

The Northern Caucasus resonates as the arena of the most prolonged as well as culturally celebrated colonial wars in Russian history, which ended at least in name with the capture of the North Caucasian leader Imam Shamil in 1859. A century of Russian cultural production, both elite and popular, would commemorate this imperial legacy with sentiments ranging from imperial jingoism to complex allegories of alienation and even open dissent. This older tradition, while nominally superseded by the construction of the polyethnic Soviet nation, was selectively diffused during the Communist period, and then powerfully revived in the nineties, providing a ready precedent for the political anxieties of the post-Soviet present.

Yet the nineties have done more than resuscitate the military tactics of the Tsarist General Ermolov, or the ambiguous literary symbols of Lermontov and Tolstoi. Among the many differences between the Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet state, we might point to the emergence in contemporary Russia of a press largely independent of state control. The recent Chechen war was in fact the first major conflict in Russian history to be fought in conditions of relatively free and frequently vigorous national debate.³ Unlike the case of the Soviet Afghan war, the political complexities and moral ambiguities of the Chechen conflict were to a considerable degree reflected in the Russian and international printed and visual media. In what we can now recognize as a significant (if already receding) moment of recent Russian history, a newly independent press became engaged in reporting an extraordinarily brutal war, generating both the critical debate and the visual detail necessary for Russians to question the monopolies of knowledge that had existed in their country until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Fought between the Russian army and the separatist militias, and implicating a local civilian population comprising both Chechens and a significant Russian minority, the conflict that exploded at the close of 1994 quickly also became a war of representations.⁴ The official rationalizations of the government were confronted, certainly for the first time since 1917, with a range of alternative ideological and visual perspectives. These new public discourses drew from a variety of sources. Relying on the simultaneity of largely uncensored daily news coverage, they 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 maneuverings of the ruling Yeltsin establishment, as well as new civic formations such as the mothers of Russian conscripts serving in Chechnya.

This range of openly voiced opinions, however unprecedented in Russia, nonetheless drew on an older and well-established Russian discourse on the Caucasus. This

³ Two precedents might be cited from the late Tsarist period: the loosening of press freedoms in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and the openly defeatist and pacifist sentiments voiced shortly before and during the revolutions of 1917 in opposition to Russia's participation in the First World War.

⁴ The most sustained discussion of this aspect of the war is to be found in Ellen Mickiewicz's book *Changing Channels. Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Cf. also the survey commissioned by USAID, "A Survey of Russian Television," which contains a section on the Chechen war, <http://www.internews.ras.ru/report/tv/tv24.html>. More generally on the recent war see Igor' Bunich, *Khronika chechenskoi boini* (St. Petersburg: Oblik, 1995), François Jean, "La nouvelle 'guerre du Caucase'," *Central Asian Survey* 16 (1997): 413-424, and two recent English monographs, one by Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya. Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), and the more ambitious book by Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya. Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

nineteenth-century discourse, particularly in its high literary variants, was far from being simply or unproblematically imperialist. Even as they subscribed to the familiar hierarchies of civilizational difference that pitted European civilization against the backward savage, Russia's greatest writers would also question the cost, at least for the Russian people, of sustaining the project of a modernizing imperial state. Although not devoid of triumphalist rationalizations of state power, Russia's classical literary tradition is striking for its other, more discordant notes—a deep sense of personal alienation counterbalanced by a nostalgia for organic form, the search for a natural condition of liberty situated outside the purview of the bureaucratic state.

Russia's literary tradition was the primary locus of Russian debate on the Caucasus until the media revolution of the post-Soviet nineties. This paper will seek to examine how the idiom of literary romanticism, both in its constructions of the other and in its implied critique of the state, collided with the verbal and visual material of the post-Soviet nineties. Did the unending images of violence, captivity and death shown on Russian television and debated in the newspapers corroborate these older myths, or did they rather threaten to empty them of their organizing power?

Literary Romanticism: the Savage, the Captive, and the Corpse

The poetry of Mikhail Lermontov (1814-1841) was essential to the popularization of a Caucasian literary mythology that vacillated crucially between demonizing and ennobling the peoples of the Northern Caucasus. This vacillation corresponded closely to the capacity of the Russian writer to serve, or dissent from, the logic of the imperial state.⁵ Beyond the familiar binary opposition of colonizer and colonized, the Russian writer figures as an ambiguous third element, whose contours need to be examined.

The simplest and most potent of Lermontov's myths was that of the Northern Caucasian as Wild Man, a potent if shadowy menace who is more than a match for his Russian or Cossack foe: "Ne spi, kazak, vo t'me nochnoi; Chechentsy khodiat za rekoi!" (Do not sleep, Cossack, in the darkness of the night;/ Chechens are moving beyond the river!). In the still more famous poem "Kazach'ia kolybel'naia pesnia," (Cossack Lullaby, 1840) Lermontov writes: "Zloi chechen polzet na bereg, Tochit svoi kinzhal" (The wicked Chechen crawls onto the shore/ and sharpens his dagger).⁶

⁵ For a history of the Northern Caucasus during the imperial period, see John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969 [1908]), the collection *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution*, ed. Taras Hunczak (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974), particularly Emanuel Sarkisyanz, "Russian Imperialism Reconsidered," 45-81; the collection *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917*, ed. Michael Rywkin (New York: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988), particularly Muriel Atkin, "Russian Expansion in the Caucasus to 1813," 139-87; Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), and Austin Lee Jersild, "From Savagery to Citizenship: Caucasian Mountaineers and Muslims in the Russian Empire," in *Russia's Orient. Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, ed. Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 101-114. Among Russian language histories of the late Soviet or post-Soviet period see N. S. Kiniapina, M. M. Blied and V. V. Degeev, *Kavkaz i sredniaia Aziia vo vneshnei politike Rossii. Vtoraia polovina XVIII-80-e gody XIX v.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1984) and the more fundamental history by M. M. Blied and V. V. Degeev, *Kavkazskaia voina* (Moscow: Roset, 1994). For the Soviet period see Marie Benningsen Broxup, "The 'Internal' Muslim Factor in the Politics of Russia: Tatarstan and the North Caucasus," in *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union. Domestic and International Dynamics*, ed. Mohiaddin Mesbahi (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 75-98.

Powerful enough to pose a constant threat to the Russian forces and Cossack villages, the resistance of the highlanders nonetheless did not immediately constitute, for Lermontov, a moral and political force. Rather it appeared as an inchoate, predatory violence, based on an elemental sense of vengeance rather than on any evolved sense of justice. Indeed, one could generalize this observation to say that the Chechen myth in Russian culture on its broadest level concerns precisely the relationship of *violence* to the *law*. Is law universal? Or is it rather a marker of the difference between cultures (and indeed of the difference between culture and nature)? How are the norms of justice to regulate (and be distinguished from) the different forms of violence (from individual and organized crime to colonial war and resistance), when those norms are themselves coercively imposed? Lermontov himself summarized this dilemma powerfully in the following verses from the poem *Izmail-Bei* (1832) that describe the culture of the mountain peoples: “I diki tekh ushcheliĭ plemena, Im bog - svoboda, ikh zakon voĭna.” (And the tribes living in those gorges are savage/ Their god is freedom, their law is war).⁷ Normally the two conceptual pairs that we find in this line—*god/freedom* and *law/war*—would be dichotomous rather than complementary: “god” and “law,” which suggest the divinely or socially sanctioned constraints of community and culture, are thus paradoxically yoked to their opposites, generating a set of tense juxtapositions that is the source of the line’s aphoristic power. Liberty, when rendered absolute, becomes pure license and hence perpetual violence. Some twenty years later, the young Lev Tolstoy wrote a diary entry in which the above lines clearly provide the model for his own experience of the Caucasus: “This savage land is indeed splendid: in it two entirely opposed things - war and freedom - are so strangely and poetically united.”⁸ From Lermontov to the young Tolstoy, the Russian romantic discourse on the Caucasus derived its poetic force, and its powers of cultural generalization, from this powerful *coincidentia oppositorum*.

By refusing assimilation into the territorial boundaries and rationalizing power of the Russian state, the Chechens were thus said to cling to a natural condition where liberty is indistinguishable from anarchy, and the freedom fighter from the criminal.⁹ The paradoxical traits that Russians projected onto the highlanders had the effect of conflating

⁶ References to the Caucasian highlanders are to be found all through Lermontov’s writings. The first quote is from Lermontov’s juvenilia, the poem *Cherkesy* (1828), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 8; the second from the poem “Kazach’ia kolybel’naia pesnia,” (1840), vol. 1, 470. Cf. also the early Lermontov poem “Kavkazskii plennik” (1828), vol. 2, 21: “I smeloi rukoĭu Chechenets voz’met Broniu zolotuiu I sabliu stal’niu I v gory uidet” (And with a bold gesture of his hand/ The Chechen will take/ The gold coat of mail/ And the steel sabre/ And will go away to the hills) and “Dary Tereka” (1839): “Na kinzhal chechentsa zlogo Slozhit golovu svoiu” (On the dagger of a wicked Chechen/ [He] will lay his head” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 460. Lermontov’s mythology is based on Cossack lore and romantic literary stereotypes already in existence (above all the precedent of Pushkin’s *Kavkazskii plennik* (1822)). In these texts, ethnic names generally do not have any differentiating anthropological function, and Chechens, Circassians and other Northern Caucasian peoples seem interchangeable. It is worth however noting an implicit difference: since the Chechen people did not have a feudal gentry, Bestuzhev-Marlinskii, Lermontov and later Tolstoy turned to the Circassian or Daghestani gentry to create the image of the Savage as doubly noble: by blood and by temperament.

⁷ Lermontov, from the poem - *Izmail Bei* (1832), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 166.

⁸ L. N. Tolstoy, July 9, 1854, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, serii 2 (Moscow, 1937), vol. 47, 10.

⁹ As Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal observe in *Chechnya. Calamity in the Caucasus*, “the Russian invaders provoked the Chechens to violence and then concluded that they were mere savages (30)” ; in this way, violent intervention became self-legitimizing. A critique of the persistent Russian tendency to interpret Chechen resistance as “religious fanaticism” or “predatory violence” can be found in Sh. Akhmadov’s article “Narodo-osvoboditel’noe dvizhenie v Chechne i na severnom Kavkaze pod predvoditel’stvom Imama Mansura v 1785-1791 gg.,” in *Chechentsy. Istorii i sovremennost’*, ed. Iu. A. Aidaeva, (Moscow: Mir domu tvoemu, 1996), 150-76.

locally codified forms of personal and collective conflict (such as raiding) with a historically determined response to Russian encroachment.¹⁰ This response was quickly translated into a typology of fixed ethnic traits, a typology that has lingered on in the official and unofficial Russian discourses of today.

It must be said, however, that Chechen culture was not simply “naturalized” by the Russian romantics as the total absence of any regulatory system of behavior. Indeed, Lermontov was among the first Russian writers to look to local customary law (*adat*), rather than to either Islamic law (*sharia*) or the fictional state of sheer anarchy, as a way of articulating (and exoticizing) the cultural specificity of the highlanders. Predictably, the custom that appears to blur the distinction between law and crime is what has most fascinated the Russian cultural imagination—namely, the blood feud, which obliges a family member to avenge the death of a kinsman by killing the murderer or even his relative. According to Chechen custom, the same act of violence could be sanctioned or condemned, depending on whether it functioned as an arbitrary provocation or a punitive response. Given the capacity of any act of violence to generate a possibly infinite chain of future retaliations, the custom of the blood feud could serve either to prevent violence altogether or to perpetuate it once it had been initiated. As Lermontov explained it: “Tam porazit’ vraga - ne prestuplen’e; Verna tam druzhba, no vernee mshchenie” (Over there to strike an enemy is not a crime; / Friendship can be trusted, but vengeance is more reliable).¹¹ The centrality of the blood feud as a plot-generating device in nineteenth-century literary texts on the Caucasus is striking. More recently, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has updated the Russian fascination with the Chechen law of vendetta by contrasting it to the workings of the Soviet state:

We Europeans, at home and at school, read and pronounce only words of lofty disdain for this savage law, this cruel and senseless butchery. But the butchery is

¹⁰ Whether local forms of conflict, such as raiding, were no more than a response to Russian encroachment, or an extension and transformation of pre-existing traditions of economic warfare, remains a controversial question for Caucasian historiography. Cf. Bliev and Degoev, *Kavkazskaia voina*, a neo-Marxist analysis which argues that the North Caucasian highlanders had evolved a “raiding system” (*nabegovaia sistema*) well before the Russian military presence, providing the internal conditions that could be catalyzed into an organized response to Russian aggression.

¹¹ Lermontov, *Izmail-Bei*, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 166. It is interesting to note that customary law (*adat*), particularly when in conflict with Islamic law, was often the object of manipulation by Russian colonial authorities later in the nineteenth century; see V. V. Karlov, *Etnokul’turnye protsessy noveishego vremeni* (Moscow: Institut Etnologii i antropologii, RAN, 1995), 52-53. On the motif of revenge in Lermontov, see R. A. Gal’tseva, “Mshchenie,” *Lermontovskaia èntsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia èntsiklopediia, 1981), 300-01. Cf. also Lermontov’s poem *Beglets* (The Deserter) written in the late 1830s, which details this custom in recounting the story of a Circassian who has fled the field of battle where his male relatives have perished at the hands of the Russians, only to face ignominy at home for failing to avenge them (*Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 464): “Bud’ veren proroku, bud’ slave vernee. Svoim izmenivshii izmenoi krovavoi, Vraga ne srazivshii, Pogibnet bez slavy” (Be faithful to the Prophet/ Be still more faithful to glory./ He who betrays his own/ Through bloody treachery,/ By not striking the enemy,/ Will perish without glory); the poem *Kally* (1830-31), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 119: “I kabardinets chernookii Bezmolvno, chistia svoi kinzhal, Uroku mshcheniia vnimam. On molod serdtsem i godami, No chuzhdyi strakha, on gotov Obychai dedov i ottsov Ispolnit’ sviato nad vragami...” (And the black-eyed Kabardinian/ Silently, while cleaning his dagger,/ Heeded the lesson of revenge./ He was young at heart and in age / But, fear being alien to him, he was prepared/ To carry out sacredly the custom of his grandfathers and fathers/ Against his enemies); and the poem *Khadzhi Abrek* (1833), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 290: “S krovavym mshchen’em, vot - zdes’ skrytym, Bez sil otmstit’ za svoi pozor, Vlachus’ ia po goram” (With bloody vengeance hidden - right here, / Without the strength to avenge my shame, / I wander through the hills...). While Lermontov is quick to see the blood feud as a marker of anthropological difference, one is tempted to think that he also found in it an analogy to the institution of the duel, illegal in Russia but widespread among the Russian gentry and based, like the blood feud, on an ethics of honor. An important related text is Pushkin’s unfinished poem *Tazit* (1829-1830, published posthumously in 1837), in which the principle of vendetta is once more the anthropological marker of Caucasian culture: Pushkin intended to show its final supersession by a superior Christian morality.

perhaps not so senseless after all. It does not sap the mountain peoples, but strengthens them.... The law of vendetta creates a force field of fear - and so gives strength to its small mountain people....

Has the socialist state offered them anything better?¹²

This passage is useful for making explicit the full gamut of responses, from disdain to ambivalent admiration, that Chechen customary law has long elicited among Russian intellectuals: its “savagery” initially establishes a negative contrast that allows for the identification of Russian and even Soviet culture with Europe. Yet this negative contrast is then reversed: in being based on a sense of personal and collective dignity, and by conferring the power of execution on the family or community rather than on a formalized punitive apparatus, Chechen custom seems finally more capable than Soviet law of guaranteeing elementary justice to its people. This latter point - namely the contrast (most often implied but here openly acknowledged by Solzhenitsyn) between Chechen customary practice and Russian and Soviet traditions of statehood - is fundamental: much of the hidden allegorical power of Russia’s literary engagement in the Caucasus derives from it.

It is thus evident that the Russian literary discourse on Chechnya is by no means rigid in the hierarchies it asserts. Indeed, its terms can be—and have been—readily inverted. The most characteristic reversal involves the transformation of the Wild Man into the Noble Savage. Hayden White has traced the place of the Noble Savage in western culture: “Sometime in the late seventeenth century,” says White, the “image of wildness is ‘fictionalized,’ that is, separated from an imagined ‘essence’ of wildness that is turned to limited use as an instrument of intracultural criticism.”¹³ The “fiction” of the Noble Savage is essentially allegorical. Deriving from nature virtues that were once considered signs of backwardness, the Noble Savage serves as a positive contrast to the coercive norms of European civilization. His resistance is no longer a sign of wildness, but functions critically, as a valorization of what risks being trampled in the march of progress.

In Russia, of course, several centuries of European cultural debate would become telescoped into a few decades. As Yuri Slezkine tells us, “unfortunate rather than repulsive savages had been around since Catherine, but in the early nineteenth century some authors began to claim that perhaps Europeans were the real savages.”¹⁴ For several decades coinciding with the heyday of Russian romanticism, the noble savage would be

¹² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956. An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. H. T. Willetts, (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1978), vols. V-VII, 405. Significantly, Solzhenitsyn is in fact describing the Chechens during their period of exile in Kazakhstan, adding: “They had been treacherously snatched from their home, and *from that day believed in nothing*” (emphasis added, 401-2). Solzhenitsyn’s own account raises the question as to whether vendetta should be viewed as an immutable tradition, a “savage and ancient law” in Solzhenitsyn’s words (404), or rather as an evolving tradition that was as much a response to Russian violence as to the challenges posed by internal disputes. Cf. also Lieven, *Chechnya. Tombstone of Russian Power*, 335-39.

¹³ Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea,” in *The Wild Man Within. An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed. Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), 30-31. For the medieval history of the Wild Man see Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages; a Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970); for a more literary account see Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage; A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

¹⁴ Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1994), 75.

popularly situated on the Russian colonial periphery, specifically in the Northern Caucasus and Siberia. This cultural myth, mediated by Russian readings of Rousseau and Byron, would in turn be displaced in the late 1840s, when the Russian intelligentsia would discover another noble savage: the Russian peasant.¹⁵

Jean-Jacques Rousseau had also linked the Noble Savage to contemporary instances of indigenous resistance to European imperial encroachment: “When I behold numbers of naked savages, that despise European pleasures, braving hunger, fire, the sword and death to preserve nothing but their independence, I feel that it is not for slaves to argue about liberty.”¹⁶ We note here the self-reflexivity of Rousseau’s critique: not only is the resistance of the savage an indictment of imperial violence; his natural state is itself freer, and hence superior, to the constraints of civilization. Lord Byron was to provide the poetic tropes to flesh out Rousseau’s critique. The descriptions of Albania in Canto Two of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (published in 1812) strikingly resemble the Northern Caucasian landscapes of the Russian romantics, for whom they doubtless provided a model. Albania, “rugged Nurse of savage men” combines a sublime alpine topography with a culture that is an amalgam of the Islamic faith and the “lawless law” of the warrior tribe: “Fierce are Albania’s children, yet they lack/ Not virtues, were those virtues more mature./ Where is the foe that ever saw their back?/ Who can so well the toil of War endure?/ Their native fastnesses not more secure/ Than they in doubtful time of troublous need:/ Their wrath how deadly! but their friendship sure,/ When Gratitude or valour bids them bleed - / Unshaken rushing on where’er their Chief may lead.”¹⁷ Here then are all the topoi to be culled by Pushkin and Lermontov, right down to specific ethnographic details: the savage engaged in perpetual warfare but rooted in a chivalrous code of behavior, combining the passions of an exuberant child with the ethics of the feudal knight.

The Noble Savage is perhaps the most significant allegorical figure in the mythology of the Caucasus. If the Wild Man remained a shadowy nocturnal menace, the Noble Savage allowed for the emergence of the North Caucasus highlander as a central protagonist of Lermontov’s orientalist poems, as well as of Tolstoi’s later classic *Haji Murat* (1904).¹⁸ In these works, the Noble Savage exists in a liminal zone where freedom

¹⁵ Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*, 75. The texts of Tolstoi, however, suggest that the romantic fascination for the Caucasus survives in a mutated form into the realist era, allowing for several coexisting manifestations of noble savagery, from peasants to Cossacks to Caucasian highlanders. Cf. Layton, “Primitive Despot and Noble Savage,” which points to the survival of the Noble Savage myth into the late-nineteenth century.

¹⁶ Rousseau, quoted by Fairchild, *The Noble Savage*, 129. Fairchild is quoting Rousseau’s notes on the native Americans. In Rousseau’s better known writings we find similar thoughts: “The savages of America, who go about quite naked and who live only off what they hunt, have never been able to be conquered. Indeed, what yoke could one impose on men who have no need for anything?” From Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discours sur les sciences et les arts” (published 1750), *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) vol. 3, 7.

¹⁷ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto The Second, Stanza LXXV, *Selected Poetry of Lord Byron* (New York: Random House, 1967). Previous quotations are from stanzas XXXVIII-XLII, and LXVII.

¹⁸ It is striking that the Wild Man cannot become a central narrative figure: in doing so, he must become the Noble Savage: hence the contrast, in the first section of Lermontov’s *Hero of our Time*, between Kazbich and Azamat (relatively marginal figures) and the central—noble—figure of Bela. The Noble Savage effectively dominates the following texts by Lermontov (all found in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2): *Kally* (1830-31), *Izmail Bei* (1832), *Aul Bastundzhi* (1833-1834), *Khadzhi Abrek* (1833), and *Beglets* (late 1830s) and the discussion below is derived from a reading of these texts. The more spiritually evolved Caucasian protagonists of *Mtsyri* (1839) and *Demon* (1841), also by Lermontov, are closely related. On the figure of the outcast or *abrek* see L. P. Semenov, *Lermontov i fol’klor Kavkaza* (Piatigorsk, 1941), 30. Cf. also Robert Reid, “Ethnotope in Lermontov’s Caucasian Poëmy,” *Russian Literature* 31 (1992): 217-74.

and lawlessness meet and are rendered indistinguishable. He is typically also an *abrek*, an outlaw or outcast. Inspired by the law of vendetta to a personal or political war of revenge, his actions nonetheless quickly exceed the logic of either personal grievance or political resistance. Since the struggle of the Noble Savage is finally against all codified norms, he resorts to acts of random violence. A metaphysical affirmation of his freedom, these acts finally alienate him from the constraints of his native culture no less than those of the Russian state. The Noble Savage thus often becomes a political turncoat or at least a cultural hybrid: Lermontov's Izmail Bei, like Tolstoi's Haji Murat (and Haji-Murat's romantic prototype, Bestuzhev-Marlinskii's Ammalat-Bek), has lived among the Russians and is temporarily allied to them, although his partial Russification only deepens his sense of uprootedness. From this derives the semantic indeterminacy of the Noble Savage: poised on the threshold between Russia and the Caucasus, constraint and freedom, culture and nature, law and crime, his life cannot generate an ideologically coherent message. His revolt is both too personal and too universal; in either case its politics are thereby muted. The literary figure that most eloquently embodied resistance to Russian imperial encroachment thus remains politically ambiguous: tellingly, both Izmail Bei and Haji Murat perish at the hands of their own people.

It could be argued that the literary myth of the Noble Savage has been positively appropriated by contemporary Chechens themselves. Yet it must be said that the Noble Savage, although arguably a victim of empire, is nonetheless not primarily a figure of anti-colonial protest: his revolt, I would suggest, serves a different purpose. Less an ethnic stereotype than a symptom or symbol of Russian and European anxieties, the Noble Savage was in fact a variant of the romantic hero, an allegorical screen upon which the Russian writer could project, and deflect, his own political alienation. Such an identification was often facilitated by an implied class solidarity: the Noble Savage in the works of Bestuzhev or Lermontov is frequently also noble by blood - not Chechen, but a deracinated member of the North Caucasian (Circassian or Daghestani) gentry—and hence a worthy analogue to the Russian aristocrat. The stubborn libertarianism of the highlander, sincerely admired by generations of Russian writers, was to provide a contrasting prism through which to contemplate the subjugation of the Russian gentry intellectual (and by extension Russia at large) to his own political system.

The relationship between the Russian writer and the Noble Savage can thus be termed one of alienated identification. This relationship has two moments: the *initial* identification between colonizer and colonized is established and then made to serve *another* opposition, situated within Russian culture itself, between the autocratic state and the creative intelligentsia. For generations of writers and their heroes, the Caucasus was primarily a place of imaginative refuge from the state apparatus, in which the wars of conquest played an essential but auxiliary role. As Susan Layton aptly notes: “The coexistence of Russia’s mythologies of noble and ignoble Caucasian savagery manifested a cultural tension of attraction toward and disaffection from the empire’s ideological center.... this romantic mentality exemplified a general Russian tendency to flee the state as an alien institution, fundamentally hostile to the national community.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Susan Layton, “Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery,” in *Russia's Orient*, 82-83, 84. Cf. also the collective volume, *Stranisty otechestvennogo kavkazovedeniia*, ed. N. G. Volkova (Moscow: Nauka, 1992): “One part of [Russian nineteenth-century] society became accustomed to viewing the highlanders as enemies, fanatics who did not understand the benefits

The Noble Savage is only the first of three figures contributing to what I would describe as an alternative and finally negative discourse about empire that has emanated, with some historical consistency, from within Russia itself. Subverting the triumphalism of official propaganda, this discourse is predicated on a profound fissure between the Russian state and its people: the common Russian is no longer identified with the imperial state, but emerges rather as its hapless victim, caught in the spiral of violence resulting from Russian military aggression and Chechen reaction. The fate of ethnic Russian civilians and conscripted Russian soldiers in Chechnya, and the escalation of hostage-taking during and after the recent war (particularly the highly symbolic siege at the Budennovsk hospital in June 1995), were readily articulated through this counter-discourse, launched and effectively summarized by the title of the celebrated Pushkin classic, *Kavkazskii plennik* (*Prisoner of the Caucasus*, published in 1822). Pushkin's poem, whose theme and very title have been taken up repeatedly by Russian artists over nearly two centuries—Lermontov, Tolstoi, Bitov, and most recently by the writer Vladimir Makanin and the film director Sergei Bodrov—had depicted the Russian hero as prisoner rather than aggressor, a somewhat passive hostage to the spectacle of imperial violence played out between the Russian state and the colonized peoples of the south.²⁰

Pushkin's *Kavkazskii plennik* recounts the fate of a Russian held captive by the highlanders. Languishing in chains, he observes their habits and daily life lived against a spectacular natural setting, before being set free by a Circassian maiden, a Noble Savage who has fallen in love with him. This apparently simple tale, whose dénouement involves the hero escaping to his homeland, also contains a deeper political and psychic parable. The Captive is a figure who is as alienated from his homeland as from his captors. Fleeing the suffocating confines of European Russia in search of the "phantom of freedom" (*prizrak svobody*), the hero ultimately finds it among the very people who hold him captive. The state of absolute freedom that Russians attributed to the highlanders is now perhaps more easily read: it is not, as initially projected, a primordial *condition* of savagery but rather a comparative *relation* between the customary laws of the highlanders, the Russian autocratic state, and an aspiring sense of autonomous literary and cultural subjectivity within Russia itself. In a pointed stanza, censored when the poem was published in 1826, the poet and playwright Griboedov makes explicit the critique of Russia's *domestic* situation that the Captive's fate expresses: "Uznikam udel obychnyi, - Nad rabami vysoka Ikh stiazhatelei ruka. Uzy - zhrebii im prilychnyi: V ikh zemle i svet

of a peaceful life in the shadow of a great power; the other part of society admired the self-sacrificing struggle of the highlanders for their freedom, and the leaders of the Russian freedom movement linked their own plans to the struggle of the highlanders (among them the émigré Polish activists of the mid-nineteenth century)."

²⁰ See A. S. Pushkin, *Kavkazskii plennik, Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960), vol. 3, 90; Lermontov, *Kavkazskii plennik, Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 17-39; L. N. Tolstoi, "Kavkazskii plennik (Byl)," *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1963), vol. 10, 225-48; Andrei Bitov, *Kavkazskii plennik* (written in 1969), vol. 3 of *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh* (Moscow: TKO-AST/Folio, 1996), in English translation, *A Captive of the Caucasus. Journeys in Armenia and Georgia*, trans. Susan Brownsberger (London: Harvill, 1992); V. S. Makanin, "Kavkazskii plennyi," in the volume *Kavkazskii plennyi* (Moscow: Panorama, 1997), 449-77; and Sergei Bodrov's film *Kavkazskii plennik*, released in English as *Prisoner of the Mountains* (1996). To this list one might add L. Gaidai's film *Kavkazskaia plennitsa, ili novye priklucheniia Shurika* (1966), a screwball comedy. For a more exhaustive account of the "Captive" as a literary topos in Russia, a list of the lesser known eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts in this tradition, and some valuable insights into the metaphysics of captivity, see Paul M. Austin's excellent article "The Exotic Prisoner in Russian Romanticism," *Russian Literature* 16 (1984): 217-74. After writing this article I was privileged to read Susan Layton's "Aleksandr Polezhaev and Remembrance of War in the Caucasus: Constructions of the Soldier as Victim" forthcoming in *Slavic Review* (Fall 1999). While discussing a writer outside my purview, Layton comes to conclusions similar to mine.

temnichnyi! I uzhasen li obmen? Doma - tsepi! v chuzhe - plen!” (To prisoners their usual lot,- / Raised high above the slaves/ is the arm of their profiteers./ Chains are a fate befitting them:/ In their land even the light seems from a dungeon!/ And is the exchange so terrible?/ Chains at home! captivity abroad!”²¹

In the fate of the Captive, then, Pushkin and those writing in his wake were able to dramatize the double-edged effects of Russia’s coercive state apparatus, which stifles the creative artist in the metropolis just as it subjugates the colonized peoples of the southern periphery. The Russian artist only has the limited choice of either identifying (metonymically) with the imperial state or seeing in the fate of the highlanders an alienated metaphor for his own disempowerment.²² Pushkin, and most Russian artists after him, in fact chose *both* options. Unable to identify fully either with the highlanders who hold him prisoner or with the geopolitical ambitions of his own government, the Captive occupies a place of radical if ambiguous alienation, one that cannot be subsumed by the legitimating narratives of imperial war.

The figure of the Captive might be seen as the Russian counterpart to the Noble Savage. Like the Savage, he embodies and individuates the cost of empire: socially ostracized and psychically alienated, he periodically revisits the Caucasus over the course of more than a century to update the contradictions of Russian imperial nationhood. This trajectory involved several cultural shifts. For the romantic poets Pushkin and Lermontov, the contrast to be contemplated was between nature and culture, a savage freedom on the one hand and the constraints of the state and high society on the other. Tolstoi was subsequently to adjust the dichotomy in order to locate the Russian *narod* (the peasant, the Cossack and the conscripted soldier) more explicitly alongside the highlander, in a metaphysical, if not political, opposition to the Russian ruling class.²³

This raises a question that has remained timely to this day: given the implicit if incomplete identification between Captive and captor, who is the victim and who the aggressor in the triangular contest between the Russian state, the Russian people and the Chechen insurgents? Published during the most recent war, V.S. Makanin’s story “Kavkazskii plennyi” (Prisoner of the Caucasus) addresses this question in a modest revision of the now classical motif. The story, set in today’s Russia, dramatizes two exchanges—a financial deal and a military clash - between the Russian army and the highlanders. In both cases, the captor/captive relationship prevailing in the romantic

²¹ A. S. Griboedov, *Khishchniki na Chegeme, Sochineniia* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1956), 366. There are two other poems by Griboedov on the captivity or constraints he experienced within Russia itself—*Osvobozhdennyi* (1826) and *Prosti, otechestvo!* (date unknown), *Sochineniia*, 368-369.

²² The most vivid and accessible literary elaboration of this choice is Lermontov’s poem, *Poët* (1838), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 448-49, in which a dagger won in battle from a highlander is seen hanging on a wall, an innocuous trophy. This story of the highlander’s defeat is then presented as analogous to the poet’s own loss of authority in the modern age. It is important to note that this alienated identification with the highlander is not a form of political solidarity (as it would become for the Ukrainian Shevchenko). The Captive’s situation remains at all times ironic: even while admiring the highlanders’ libertarian traditions, the Russian must also serve as an ambivalent symbol of the very country he fled: his captivity becomes a condition of the highlanders’ liberty, just as his release is seen to anticipate the highlanders’ ultimate subjugation by Russia. In this context, liberty is not a universal right: it is rather seen as something privative, a freedom that must be usurped from another.

²³ Tolstoi’s realignment of the nature/culture divide with respect to the Caucasus can be traced from two early stories that mark the beginning of his literary career, “Nabeg” (The Raid, 1852) and “Rubka lesa” (Felling the Forest, 1853-55), to the *povest* “Kazaki” (The Cossacks, 1852-1863) and to its final apotheosis in *Haji Murat* (completed in 1904).

tradition is questioned and even inverted. Alibek, a local dealer who barter food for weapons with a pragmatically corrupt Russian officer, comments wryly to his interlocutor: “You must be joking, Petrovich. Me a captive? You’re the captive around here..... and every one of your soldiers here is a captive!... It’s me who’s not the captive.”²⁴ Alibek’s comment is put to the test in the story’s main encounter: the capture of a handsome young insurgent by two Russian soldiers. Makanin inverts Pushkin’s plot to make the captive a highlander and not a Russian.²⁵ Also inverted is the love interest of the original story: Pushkin’s one-sided and finally abortive heterosexual encounter between the Russian prisoner and the Circassian girl is here replaced by a nervously reciprocated homoerotic encounter between the young highlander and one of his Russian captors that ends brutally with the highlander’s murder. Makanin frames his story with a meditation on beauty: the sublime grandeur of the mountains, alongside the exquisite face of the Chechen boy, serves to unsettle the logic of war and the (still unquestioned) superiority of the Russian army.

Pitted here are two forces: Chechen and Russian, to be sure, but more universally the power of beauty (functioning here as a kind of *mémoire involontaire*, akin to erotic obsession or an instinctual life-principle) and the force of violence, equated with oblivion and repression. While reversing the external hierarchies of Pushkin’s plot, Makanin finally confirms Alibek’s observation, which is also Pushkin’s deepest intuition in *Kavkazskii plennik*: that in seeking to subjugate the Caucasus, Russia had rather become its prisoner, falling captive to a natural grandeur that rivals and finally eclipses Russia’s imperial vision. “The hills. The hills. The hills. For so many years now their grandeur, their mute solemnity had been tearing at his heart - but what exactly did their beauty want to tell him? Why did it call him?”²⁶

²⁴ Makanin, “Kavkazskii plennyi,” 453. The preface by Natal’ia Ivanova informs us that the story was published during the war but written earlier (no precise date is provided).

²⁵ There are of course precedents for this reversal: Lermontov’s *Mtsyri* (1839) for example deals with a highlander who is forcibly absorbed into Russian culture, (more accurately Georgian Christian culture, here acting as Russia’s proxy). In fact all the Noble Savages can be considered captives of empire.

²⁶ Makanin, “Kavkazskii plennyi,” 477. There are several intertexts for this passage: Tolstoi’s *Kazaki* (The Cossacks), chapter three, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1961), 174, where the topographical difference between the Russian plain and the Caucasus mountains is made to carry a vaster symbolic burden: “At first the hills only astonished Olenin, then they made him cheerful; but then, the more he gazed into this chain of snowcapped mountains, emerging and receding not from other black mountains but from the steppe itself, he gradually began to grasp this beauty and feel the mountains. From that moment on everything he saw, everything he thought, everything he felt took on for him the new and austere magnificent character of the mountains....”, and Pushkin’s *Kavkazskii plennik*, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 115: “Ee plenial nariad surovoyi Plemen, vozrosshikh na voine, I chasto v sei odezhde novoi Volshebniitsa iavlialas’ mne” (She [my Muse] was captivated by the austere garb/ of tribes who were raised on war/ And often in this new clothing/ The enchantress would appear to me.” Captivity is here raised to a figurative level: the artist’s muse is first “captivated” by the martial virtues of the highlanders, whose threatening masculinity the Muse then transforms by translating it into a form of feminine seduction. This is similar to the erotic drama in Makanin’s story: the young Chechen boy is repeatedly feminized as an embodiment of beauty, yet his seductive capacity remains a threat to the Russian soldier’s physical superiority: “[The youth] smiled to himself, as if playfully savouring his victory over this huge, strong, yet shy hulk of a man” (Makanin, 470). In conflating the boy’s beauty with the landscape, Makanin continues the old Russian tradition of allegorizing empire as a confrontation between culture and nature. Nature, while defeated by the forces of history, survives as a spectacle to be represented through the aesthetics of the mountainous *sublime*, which inspires fear more than pleasure. The chief milestones of this tradition are Derzhavin’s “Na vozvrashchenie iz Persii grafa Zubova cherez kavkazskie gory Grafa V. A. Zubova” (1797), Zhukovskii’s “K Voelikovy. Poslanie” (1814), Pushkin’s *Kavkazskii plennik* and related lyrics, Griboedov’s “Khishchniki v Chegeme” (1825), Lermontov (see notes 9, 11 and 18, but cf. also his poem “Spor” [1841]), Tolstoi (see note 16) and, in the twentieth century, the “Caucasian” poetry of Khlebnikov and Pasternak. Many of these verses are conveniently gathered in the anthology *Kavkaz v russkoi poëzii*. For a discussion of the imperial sublime, see my article, “Russian Poetry and the Imperial Sublime.”

The Captive, we begin to realize, is an allegorical figure. His jail is the vast “prisonhouse of peoples,” as Marx once called the Tsarist empire: at once both impregnable and hollow, this prisonhouse crowds the distinct locales and histories of each people into a shared narrative frame in which Russian and Chechen remain equally - if differently - trapped. Of all the contemporary Russian writers who have remained in dialogue with the classical tradition, it is Andrei Bitov who has most profoundly (if rather elliptically) intuited the figural dimension of the Captive. In his “Uroki Armenii” (Lessons of Armenia, written in 1967-9), Bitov muses:

I am in a cage - everyone is looking at me. No, they're the ones who are looking at me from inside the cage. I'm on the outside. I fooled everyone....

I have been placed in the pit of time. A young girl runs down singing from the hills, gives me her pitcher to drink... Prisoner of the Caucasus. One day the captive finds a watermelon seed left in his pocket ... He plants it. He waits for it to sprout. The shoot is a watch: it spreads its leaves and ticks its way up and up.

My timelessness has finally sprouted. And what would I have understood and seen, if I had not been capable of grasping, when I was in that cage with the parrots, that besides mine there exists *another* time, their time. If I had not been able to renounce my own time, dismiss it with a wave, I would not have had any *time* in Armenia, only hours, days, kilograms and kilometers of unexperienced, missed, in fact *lost* (or wasted: *poteriannogo*) time, weighed on wristwatches, alarm clocks and the chiming bells of the clocktower.²⁷

The Captive embodies the subtler psychic or subjective burden of empire. In Bitov's allegory, this burden is articulated as the challenge of cultural empathy across the imperial divide. Here the place of the captive and the captor is dynamic, as reciprocal as the relationship of the seer and the seen. Seen spatially, the prisonhouse (cage or pit) of empire is a perspectival prism: the lens is shared, even as the locus and the viewer shift. Seen temporally, the prisonhouse reveals the persistence of national or cultural difference, “my time” and “their time.” Figurally, Bitov's passage spatializes time even as it pretends conceptually to privilege time over space: each metaphor (“pit,” “shoot,” “cage”) dramatizes the strain of reconciling national time (different local chronologies) and imperial space (which they are condemned, as captives, to share).²⁸

In investigating the Noble Savage and the Captive, I have explored the *political* and the *psychic* dimensions of the Russian mythology of the Caucasus. The final figure inherited from the classical tradition is one that embodies the most physiological of imperial anxieties, death in battle. The Corpse is the most visceral of figures, in which the

²⁷Bitov, *Kavkazskii plennik*, 85 (Brownsberger, trans., *A Captive of the Caucasus*, 90-91), author's italics throughout. The image of the pit (*iama*) is from Tolstoi's “Kavkazskii plennik (Byl’);” it also reappears in Bodrov's film.

²⁸ Bitov's cultural sympathies, while generous, are typically “ethnographic.” The notion of different temporalities - allochry - as a figure of cultural or anthropological difference is explored by Johannes Fabien, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Fabien's argument is that modernity requires the primitive as a temporal concept, the latter being a “category, not an object, of Western thought” (18); denied in this process is the “coevalness” of different cultures. Bitov's attempt to contrast modern “clock-time” with “their time” is a fine example of what Fabien is critiquing.

strains of reconciling personal and national aspirations with imperial aggression become graphically embodied. In the verse of the poet-soldier Lermontov we discover all the necessary elements of the Corpse as a Caucasian motif. The mature and already post-romantic poem “Valerik” (1840), set in Chechnya, goes a long way in demystifying the glory of battle. Stressing the experiential gap between the lot of the ordinary soldier and the pampered lives of the Russian élite, “Valerik” stages the spectacle of death and dying to strip imperial war of its ideological rationale. Far from the retrospective distortions and projections of the military strategists and historians is the raw experience of witnessing and surviving death: “I vy edva li Vblizi kogda-nibud’ vidali, Kak umiraiut. Dai vam Bog I ne vidat’...” (You would have hardly/ Ever seen from close at hand/ How people die. God grant/ You never will....)²⁹

Lermontov’s use of the phenomenology of dying as a critique of war strikingly anticipates Tolstoi’s great epiphanies of death in battle: together they constitute a Russian tradition that has insisted on the futility of war even as it affirms the simple courage of the Russian soldier. To justify the soldier’s self-sacrifice without subordinating his life to a political cause, the writer must account for the soldier’s death at a level beyond history. This quest for a metaphysics of dying, a constant of Russian literature, is nonetheless forced to confront the threatening indeterminacy of the Corpse, whose harsh materiality, and historicity, survive the glimpse of transcendence that has been granted the dying soldier and those who mourn him.

Reconciling death and dying, the nagging indeterminacy of the Corpse and the promise of transcendence, is the act of burial. This symbolic gesture of reconciliation is ideally complemented by a geographical one: the body of the dead soldier, in being consigned to the ground, is also brought home, thereby reconciling the foreign theatre of imperial war with the motherland. The Caucasian poetry of Lermontov is tormented by the fear that this posthumous homecoming is no longer possible. Empire, it seems, threatens the organic connection between the dead (or the exile) and the living that is the national memory. In the emblematic poem “Spesha na sever izdaleka” (Hastening Northward from Afar, 1837) Lermontov writes: “No est’ eshche odno zhelanie! Boius’ skazat’! - dusha drozhit! Chto, esli ia so dnia izgnaniia Sovsem na rodine zabyt!.... Ili sredi mogil kholodnykh Ia nastupliu na prakh rodnoi Tekh dobrykh, pylkikh, blagorodnykh, Delivshikh molodost’ so mnoi? O esli tak! svoei metel’iu, Kazbek, zasyp’ menia skorei I prakh bezdomnyi po uschel’iu Bez sozhaleeniia razvei.” (But there is one more desire!/ I’m frightened to say it! My soul trembles!/ What if since the day of my exile/ I have been forgotten in my homeland!.... Or will I step among cold graves/ Upon the native ashes/ Of those fine, ardent, noble [people]/ Who shared their youth with me?/ O, if that is so/ Then Kazbek, bury me quickly/ With your snowstorm/ And scatter without regret/ My homeless ashes along the ravine.”)³⁰

²⁹ Lermontov, “Valerik” (1840), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 504.

³⁰ Lermontov, “Spesha na sever izdaleka” (1837), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 432. Cf. also “Pamiati A.I. O[doevsko]go” (1839), 461, and “Son” (1841), 530. It is also worth noting that many of the Wild Men or Noble Savages are also abandoned without burial, and often in a violently mutilated form: Bertuzhev Marlinskii’s Ammalat Bek, Lermontov’s Izmail-Bei and Khadzhi-Abrek, and Tolstoi’s Haji Murat.

To survive unremembered and unmourned is to experience a kind of living death that obviates the possibility of human burial and true homecoming. In the thematically related poem “Pamiati A.I. O[doevsko]go” (In Memory of A.I. Odoevskii, 1839), Lermontov ponders the “unknown grave” of the Decembrist soldier-poet A.I. Odoevskii, who has perished near the Black Sea. Although mourned and consecrated in the “mute graveyard” of the poet’s memory, Odoevskii’s body remains in exile: lost to Russian culture, his corpse is absorbed, like the poet’s in “Spesha na sever izdaleka,” into the sublime natural landscape of the Caucasus.

The apotheosis of the Corpse in Lermontov’s lyric verse is the extraordinary “Son” (A Dream, 1841), a poem that brings together most of the concerns of the Caucasian literary tradition. Here the soldier-poet locates his own dying body in a valley of Daghestan. The poem dramatizes the extreme tension between the brute materiality of the wounded body and the still vivid dream-life of a fading consciousness. Lying unburied in a foreign land, the poet-soldier dreams of his beloved back home, who in turn dreams of him already dead, a “familiar corpse” lying bleeding in a Daghestani valley. This complex circuit of memory binding the soldier-poet to his homeland, like the harsh Daghestani landscape that defies it, asks to be read historically. The typically Lermontovian tension between matter—the unburied and mutilated Corpse in a stubbornly physical landscape—and consciousness—the social and metaphysical reconciliation offered by mourning and memory—might also be read as the persistent gap between empire and nation. Nationhood, for the poet, is the dream of homecoming, a return to origins that contrasts service to the state with the authentic rhythms and human collectivity of rural Russia. Empire is precisely what frustrates the dream of repatriation: killed for and yet abandoned by the imperial cause, the poet’s body remains unburied, destined to decompose into the land he fought to occupy.

The Lermontovian Corpse might thus be seen as the Russian national body. If the rites of mourning and burial mark the nostalgia for organic national community, then their absence suggests the symbolic dislocation of nationhood effected by the imperial state. Merging physically with the land it fought to conquer, the Corpse might be seen as a figure of imperial expansion, even as its abandonment points to the social and psychic cost imposed on the Russian nation.

The richness of the “Caucasian tradition” in Russian letters derives from an interplay between a typically romantic form of creative alienation and the cultural opportunities afforded by a prolonged and brutal colonial war. The Savage, the Captive, and the Corpse are three figures that bear witness to both elements. The Savage had intimated a predictable civilizational divide between colonizer and colonized. Yet the Captive and the Corpse pointed to other divisions, namely the fissure *within* Russia between the nation or people (*narod*) and the imperial state. To summarize, one might conclude that the Russian artist, while seldom denouncing the empire explicitly, provided an alienated prism through which to contemplate the “prisonhouse of nations” in which both the Russian and the highlander were—however differently—trapped.

The Other War: Cultural Myths and Official Propaganda in the Chechen Conflict

To what extent did the Caucasian myths of the classical literary tradition survive into the 1990s? We have already seen, in the case of Makanin, that Russian artists continue to address and remake the literary canon. Yet it is also true that, 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. What are the continuities and ruptures, then, between the representations of the classical tradition, and those massively diffused in the nineties by the newer channels of information?

Before turning to the private media, let us examine the official rationale for the recent war provided by the Yeltsin government, as well as some aspects of the nationalist discourse of the Chechen insurgency. Aware of but unprepared for its loss of control over the means of information, the Russian government acted with a kind of disorganized insouciance. It was clearly committed to continuing the war irrespective of popular opinion; more surprisingly, it proved unable to “manage” the war as a daily discursive event for which it had to compete with other sources of information.³¹ Nonetheless, an official perspective on the war and the nature of the declared enemy did emerge. Widely denounced for its brazen inaccuracy and kneejerk falsehoods, government propaganda took the form of announcements and bulletins that were routinely belied by independent press reports, as well as brochures and pamphlets exposing the criminal basis of the Dudaev regime.³²

In these brochures, the figures of the Chechen Savage and the Russian Captive were sociologically updated and stripped of their literary nuances. Under the rubric “Twentieth-Century Slaves,” one of these brochures, published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and entitled *Kriminal'nyi rezhim Chechnia* (The Criminal Régime in Chechnya), provides sensational accounts, including one entitled “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” of recently liberated Russian prisoners who had been subjected to forced labor on Chechen territory.³³ Such slaves, we are told, are gathered from the entire former Soviet Union and have become a routine part of the Chechen rural economy. The stories follow the bare essentials of Pushkin’s story, from captivity to liberation. Yet, as one would expect from state propaganda remote from the artistic sensibilities of the nineteenth century, these

³¹ Cf. Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, 247: “The government’s mistake in not producing information when competing sources were available was matched in the field by its policy of secrecy and obstructionism with journalists. By refusing to admit or cooperate with journalists, the Russian military left Dzhokhar Dudayev to welcome the media with almost courtly solicitude.” Two precious volumes document the struggle of the independent media with the Russian government over the Chechen war: *Zhurnalisty na chechenskoi voine, Fakty. Dokumenty. Svidetel'stva. Noiabr' 1994 - dekabr' 1995* (Moscow: Izd.Prava Cheloveka, 1995) and *Informatsionnaia voina v Chechne. Fakty. Dokumenty. Svidetel'stva. Noiabr' 1994 - sent'iabr' 1996* (Moscow: Izd.Prava Cheloveka, 1997); cf. the statement from *Ogonek*, no. 36 (1996), quoted in *Informatsionnaia voina v Chechne*, 371: “The Federal troops lost the war largely because of their closedness to the media.”

³² Examples of Russian federal government propaganda on the war are *Kriminal'nyi rezhim Chechnia 1991-1995gg. Fakty, dokumenty, svidetel'stva*, ed. A. G. Gorlov (Moscow: Kodeks, 1995), *Chechenskaia tragediia. Kto vinovat.* (Moscow: RIA “Novosti”, 1995), both published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the much more nuanced *Chechenskii krizis: Ispytanie na gosudarstvennost'*, edited by the same A. G. Gorlov (Moscow: Kodeks, 1995).

³³ See *Kriminal'nyi rezhim Chechnia*, 58-64. Irina Dement'eva dismisses the notion of a genocidal policy against Russians in Chechnya as a “myth” created by the Moscow authorities in the eighties, and continued into the nineties; see her article “Chechenskaia pressa na fone Chechni,” *Informatsionnaia voina v Chechne*, 484.

stories are quite devoid of romantic alienation, exotic color, or cultural empathy. The contrast between the captor and captive is absolute, reinforcing the image of Russian victimhood, while the role of the Russian state is shown to be benign in intention yet oddly limited. The Russian army stumbles across the captives, “freeing” them in a somewhat haphazard fulfillment of its role as the people’s guardian, yet the authorities remain incapable of preventing the predatory Chechens from conducting “raids” throughout Russia, capturing slaves to be bought and sold on the Chechen market. In the official government version of the nineties, center and periphery, aggressor and victim, are thus inverted, and the border wars of the nineteenth century have moved to the metropolis.

One is struck by how willingly the authorities here concede the porosity and anarchy of post-Soviet space, and hence their own impotence as a centralizing force. The confident rhetoric of imperial expansion or socialist construction has been replaced, in the nineties, by one of national emergency. This latter shift is significant: while purely geopolitical and neo-imperialist considerations doubtless informed official policy-making, one should not underestimate the specificity of the post-Soviet dilemma, in which a weakened and internally factionalized state was emerging as only one factor in a complex imbrication of political and economic interests. Still decisive in its capacity for organized violence, the Russian state was at the same time confronted by an array of related challenges that exposed its limits: a growing private and transnational economy, terrorism and organized crime, and, finally, a separatist insurgency that, precisely in being channeled into an aspiration to statehood, at the same time called into question the efficacy of the modern nation-state as a political model.³⁴

The more scholarly pamphlet *Chechenskii krizis: Ispytanie na gosudarstvennost’* (*The Chechen Crisis: A Test of Statehood*) revives Marxist categories to label Chechens “tribalistic,” a people (*narod*) perhaps, but not a nation (*natsiia*). Under a rubric tellingly entitled “Sovereignty and Piracy” the authors write: “The Chechens as a people are quite consolidated. But the form of this consolidation contains clearly marked feudal, tribal, and clan elements... In Chechnya we are dealing with a traditional society in the stage of primitive capital accumulation. The criminal character of such accumulation creates a complex symbiosis of traditional activity and crime, with the latter frequently not even acknowledged as crime.”³⁵ However accurate as an account of Chechnya today, this

³⁴ Both during and well after the Dudaev era, Chechnya has provided a striking contemporary example of deterritorialized space, a borderland through which goods, arms, oil, and money have flowed unchecked across loosely controlled frontiers in complex transactions between private, criminal, military, and ostensibly state interests located both in Russia and in Chechnya proper. Since at least the beginning of the war, independent Chechnya has remained internally decentralized, with the government exerting only nominal authority over field commanders who enjoy military-territorial autonomy over their zones of control. Dismissively termed a “criminal free trade zone” by the Russian Vice-Premier Sergei Shakhrai in 1994, Chechnya’s political crisis appears in many ways to be postnational, in that it has repeatedly fallen short of the legitimating rationales of both imperial and anticolonial models of statehood. Shakhrai’s statement can be found in Gorlov, ed., *Kriminal’nyi rezhim Chechnia*, 5. The term “military-territorial autonomy” and the corresponding description of postwar Chechnya belongs to Vladimir Zorin, chairman of the Russian Duma’s Committee on Nationality Affairs, as quoted by Il’ia Maksakov and Igor’ Rotar’ in the article “V neutralizatsii Maskhadova zainteresovany mnogie” (Many in Chechnya are Interested in Neutralizing Maskhadov), *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 24 July 1998. A more detailed account of the so-called “free trade zone” operating under Dudaev can be found in Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya. Calamity in the Caucasus*, 116-36.

³⁵ S. Kurginian, V. Solokhin, M. Podkopaeva, “Suverenitet i piratstvo,” *Chechenskii krizis: Ispytanie na gosudarstvennost’*, 8.

statement might also be read allegorically, as a description of post-Soviet Russia as a whole, a possibility to which I will return shortly.

Chechnya appears in these official or semi-official pamphlets as a peculiar historical anachronism: relegated by economic determinism to an archaic stage of socio-economic development, the Chechens are, by virtue of their said aptitude for criminal activity, nevertheless acknowledged as part of a highly contemporary transnational circuit of financial interests, involving oil, drugs, and weapons. Identifying itself with the constitutional order and the national interest, the government thus sought to delegitimize the Chechens as either (or both) *pre*-national or *post*-national: in either case, they could not be seen as coeval with the Russian state.

Yet if the Chechen people did not *temporally* coincide with the nation-state, *spatially* they were seen to be omnipresent, within and beyond their borders. The Russian government was quick to point to Chechen criminal interests, effectively equated with the Dudaev regime but said to be acting outside Chechnya as its extraterritorial agent, as the hidden motor of the entire conflict. In a particularly deft move, President Boris Yeltsin used the same motif as a means to collapse his two adversaries - the Dudaev regime and the Russian media- into one: "Chechen money," he declared, "is not uninvolved in the functioning of certain sectors of the media."³⁶

The allegation, true or not, revealed the profound shifts taking place in Russia during the nineties, even as it revealed Yeltsin's desire to manipulate the popular anxieties that these shifts had unleashed. If liberalization has loosened the government's monopoly over information and commerce, it has also been perceived popularly as a massive robbery by various financial interests of the public wealth. With the distinction between legitimate business, the executive arm of government, and criminal activity increasingly blurred during the nineties, the Russian authorities strove to channel popular resentment toward more selective targets, such as the ethnically organized networks that had evolved in the informal economy of the late Soviet era and which surfaced, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as one of the defining images of the Chechen diaspora.³⁷

³⁶ Yeltsin's statement, made on 27 December 1994, is quoted in *Zhurnalisty na chechenskoj voine*, 157. Similar statements were made by other representatives of the government (see 158-59.) Irina Dement'eva believes that, like the notion of an anti-Russian pogrom in Chechnya, the threat of the Chechen Mafia to Russian national interests is a notion that is older than the present crisis, going back to the Communist period; see *Informatsionnaia voina v Chechne*, 331.

³⁷ In *Comrade Criminal: Russia's New Mafiya* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 222, Stephen Handelman acknowledges that "the Chechens' ability to act as both a criminal and political force set them apart at first from their Russian counterparts - but it established a pattern that would soon be followed throughout the post-Soviet underworld." But he adds: "Yet for all their money, even the Chechens were, in the end, only junior partners in the military's expanding commercial operations" (223). The "criminal" or "economic" rationale for the war was officially adopted by the Yeltsin government. My intention is of course not to support the government rationale; indeed I would suggest that the "postnational" elements of the Chechen (and Russian) situation expose the debility of statist rhetoric on either side. For a theorization of the postnational condition in a way that seems germane to the Chechen conflict, cf. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 166: "This incapacity of many deterritorialized groups to think their way out of the imaginary of the nation-state is itself the cause of much global violence because many movements of emancipation and identity are forced, in their struggles against existing nation states, to embrace the very imaginary they seek to escape. Postnational and nonnational movements are forced by the very logic of actually existing nation-states to become antinational or antistate and thus to inspire the very state power that forces them to respond in the language of counternationalism."

Rhetorically speaking, then, Yeltsin's accusation is suggestive: it asks to be read as an implicit acknowledgement of the Russian state's own evolution from Cold War protagonist to an increasingly passive witness to the wider shifts in the nation's political economy. The truth was not that Chechen money had financed Russian media opposition to the war, but rather that the same process of economic and political change underlay the privatization of the Russian media as well as the transformation of the Chechen from prenational "savage" to postnational "criminal," linked processes equally evading the purview of the state.

In this updating of the romantic figure of the Savage, we can locate much of the drama of the post-Soviet nineties. The Savage, we remember, had dramatized for an earlier era the role of violence in Russia's civilizing mission and the capacity of the coercive state apparatus to imagine and then condition the nature and form of resistance to it. Such resistance, we also recall, came not only from the colonized peoples of the Caucasus, but also from an incipient Russian civil society, of which the creative alienation of the artist was a powerful symptom. Through the Savage, the Russian people were able to externalize and sublimate their own resistance to the state, and then countenance a repression more brutal than the savagery it was said to combat. "Savagery" was to Tsarist autocracy what "crime" is to the post-Soviet state: not only has criminal activity exposed the weakness of Russia's state institutions, it has also collapsed the distinction between legitimate and extralegal activity in politics and the economy, and in the use of force. Like the Savage, the Criminal appears initially to be an external threat; yet, in being fought, he suddenly collapses inward, to become a distorted mirror of the state itself. President Yeltsin's offered rationale for the Chechen war is telling in this respect:

The [Dudaev] regime in Chechnya made criminal business activity its main cause. Criminal activity became the primary source of its income.....

The organic fusion of the criminal world with political power - which both politicians and journalists have been speaking of incessantly as the main danger facing Russia - has become a reality in Chechnya. It has been the launching pad for the preparation and diffusion of criminal power into other regions of Russia. If we do not want to see a repetition of the events in Chechnya, we are obliged from now on to prevent the establishment of regional dictatorships elsewhere in Russia.....³⁸

In this statement, the figleaf of constitutional law appears particularly thin: at stake, according to Yeltsin's own admission, is a vaster criminalization of politics and the economy, whereby Chechnya seems to differ little from Russia as a whole, except in being further advanced in the criminalization process. In attacking Chechnya, the Russian government was thus collapsing cause and effect, exorcizing (and hence externalizing) a demon that was in fact equally characteristic of Russia's own post-Soviet evolution.

³⁸ Yeltsin's statement, from his annual speech to the Federal Assembly (probably 1995), is quoted in Gorlov, ed., *Kriminal'nyi rezhim Chechnia*, 88; emphasis added.

Government disinformation, however ineffectual, provoked a ready response on the part of the Chechen resistance and its media. The liberal journalist Irina Dement'eva has noted the “almost total absence of falsehood” as a means of propaganda among Chechen journalists in the early stages of the war: given the outrages committed by the Russian army, she concludes, “for them the truth was the most effective weapon.”³⁹ More specifically, the Chechens, in contrast to the government, quickly understood the importance of remaining open to the Russian and western media: intuiting the role of the independent press in consolidating a visual imagery of nationhood, they did much to facilitate the saturation of Russian television with footage of the war, compelling Russians, even more than Chechens, to see the war as a crisis of national identity and global prestige.

The discourse of Chechen nationalism is too vast a topic for this paper; I will here limit myself to commenting on the possible persistence of Russian romantic imagery in the contemporary claims of Chechen nationalists. Several analysts such as Valery Tishkov have noted the existence in post-Soviet debates of a deeply rooted “ethnographic romanticism” concerning the history and national ethos of the Chechen people. Derived from “academic and literary-journalistic texts,” this romanticism has now “passed into mass consciousness, including that of the Chechens themselves.” The example often given is that of Tolstoi’s Haji Murat: an allegorical figure evoked as a contrast to the ills of Tsarism now serves to provide the contemporary North Caucasian reader with a positive self-image.⁴⁰

Given the traumas of exile, historical erasure, and forced Russification imposed on the Chechen people, it is not surprising that Chechen nationalism has in part adopted the literary myths of the Russian tradition. The Chechen poet and former president Zelimkhan Iandarbiev thus defines “Caucasianness” (*kavkazskost'*) as an “exclusive attachment to the ideal of freedom, both personal and national, that refuses to recognize even conditional frameworks that might delimit it. The Caucasian character is a combination of individual and collective freedoms, a maximalism of independence that seemed a kind of savagery to civilizing Russia but which is in fact the concentrated expression of a free spirit.”⁴¹ This free spirit nonetheless seeks expression in the nation-state, since, for Iandarbiev as for his favorite philosopher Hegel, “freedom is true only as a state.”⁴² It is not difficult to discern here the mytheme of the Noble Savage and his

³⁹ Dement'eva, “Chechenskaia pressa na fone Chechni,” 491-92.

⁴⁰ V. A. Tishkov, E. L. Beliaeva, and G. B. Marchenko in *Chechenskii krizis. Analiticheskoe obozrenie* (Moscow: Izd. TsKSIiM, 1995), 32-33. For Tishkov et al. the literariness of these myths is enough to discredit them; this is of course not my point.

⁴¹ Zelimkhan Iandarbiev, “Kavkazskost',” *Checheniia - Bitva za sovobodu* (Lviv: Svoboda narodiv, 1996), 402-403. Iandarbiev's Russian poetry contains polemical echoes of the Russian classics: Lermontov's denunciation of Russia as “unwashed” (*nemytaia*) is taken up and repeated: “You were unwashed, and remain unwashed” (440). Cf. also the polemically inflected and somewhat idealized representation of the Chechen national ethos in Lyoma Usmanov, *Nepokorennaiia Chechnia* (Moscow: Parus, 1997), 31-66, and Vakhidi Itayev, “Mozhno li narod byt' 'krainim'?” *Pravda* 17 May 1995, republished in *Chechentsy. Istorii i sovremennost'*, 54-58. Naturally I do not wish here to suggest that the Chechen national ethos is derived purely from Russian literary models, but rather that the elevation of ethnic traits and customs (*adat*) into a notion of national specificity certainly owes much to nineteenth-century European romanticism. The other significant non-Russian cultural legacy is that of Shamil's Islamic imamate.

⁴² Iandarbiev, 180; the quotation is repeated on 434. Hegel is also quoted again on 401. Iandarbiev's thinking is essentially a kind of Hegelian romanticism, according to which history is shaped by a spirit that becomes concretely embodied in various world-historical nations, a status to which the Chechens must aspire.

historical dilemma: in affirming an untrammelled sense of liberty, his revolt remains inchoate and elemental; in acquiring a collective political form, such as a nation-state, it becomes a contradictory and derivative response inspired by dominant Western social paradigms (this was surely Tolstoi's - not altogether accurate - conclusion in drawing a parallel between the Tsarist state and the North Caucasian Imamate of Shamil; this, one might add, is also the risk run by the independent Chechen state today).⁴³

The Media War

The Chechen war was also a media war. Indeed, one might say that it was the emergence of critical representations of the Chechen war that marked the coming of age of the independent and privately owned Russian mass media. As James Schwoch has it, the Chechen conflict was a powerful catalyst that allowed Russian television to develop its own "post-Cold War habits," definitively shattering the sealed and carefully controlled informational space of the Soviet Union, in which the prestige of the state and of the armed forces was assumed to be paramount and identical to those of the nation as a whole.⁴⁴

Television, radio and the printed word (generally in that order), often at considerable risk to the lives of journalists (of whom twenty perished in Chechnya during the war), brought the brutalities of the war into most Russian households, and a clear divergence between official reports and other representations of the war was soon perceived.⁴⁵ This ideological pluralism, seen most strikingly in the evident contrast between the often clumsily conceived disinformation circulated by the Russian government and the open pacifism professed by much of the Russian press and echoed to a large extent by opinion polls, can be seen as a watershed in the evolution of a post-Soviet civil society. In all events, it appears that the Chechens, abetted in very different ways by the undisciplined viciousness of the Russian army and the relative candor of the Russian press, as well as by their own astute understanding of the role of the global media in contemporary warfare, won the propaganda war long before they were actually able to conclude a favorable peace treaty with the Yeltsin government.

The Chechen conflict also accelerated the approximation of the Russian media to global patterns of news coverage, whereby typically CNN-style media strategies of

⁴³ One might question Tolstoi's "realism" in *Haji Murat*, which, while aesthetically convincing, is overwhelmingly subordinated to his goal of denouncing the Russian state and all forms of political power. To suggest that Chechen nationalism is in part "literary" is not to trivialize the historical tragedy that gave rise to it. Rather it is to suggest that post-colonial nationhood is a response beset with problems: cf. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. A Derivative Discourse?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), who suggests that anti-colonial nationalism is necessarily derivative, a prisoner, ideologically and epistemologically, of European post-Enlightenment thinking.

⁴⁴ James Schwoch, "Television, Chechnya, and National Identity After the Cold War: Whose Imagined Community?" in *Writing Media Histories: Nordic Views*, ed. Raimo Salokangas, James Schwoch and Kalle Virtapohja (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä Press, 1997), 97.

⁴⁵ For a list of journalists who perished in the war see *Informatsionnaia voina v Chechne*, 138. Cf. also Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, 254-55: "The Russian public's interest in the Chechen War was intense, and Moscow-based television was the chief source of information for people all over the country. Even where an official version of events existed, "it was forced to coexist with independently gathered information" (256).

saturated daily coverage filled with dramatic and instantaneous visual detail exploded on Russian independent television. Indeed, the Russian media, particularly the television station NTV (Independent Television), outdid their Western counterparts in what they showed on screen.⁴⁶ As one Western paper noted, “the war, deeply unpopular throughout Russia, dominates the evening news on television night after night with its ghastly images of charred bodies, smashed homes, and weeping refugees.”⁴⁷

The presence of both Western and Russian journalists on the frontline, and the media culture that they increasingly shared, highlighted the now familiar paradox that global coverage has generated in similar conflict situations around the world. On the one hand, the TV viewer was made witness to a postnational space of ethnically mixed populations and porous borders that allow for a chaotic flow of people, information, commerce, and weapons. On the other hand, this very mobility of information served to rework and consolidate various national identities, official and unofficial, on both the Russian and the Chechen side. The spectacle of violence, then, highlighted both the crisis of the post-Soviet state, and the persistence of identity formations claiming a far older history even as these histories were being newly articulated.⁴⁸

Perhaps for the first time in Russian history, the visual iconography of an historic event vied with and often eclipsed its discursive narration, even for those physically removed from the conflict. Daily footage of the conflict quickly undermined the official view of the conflict as a “small, victorious war,” a surgically directed blitzkrieg against isolated groups of criminal bandits. What emerged was a spectacle of general carnage in which no distinction was made between rebel militias and an ethnically mixed local population. In a war where the major part of the casualties were civilian, it is not surprising that the most powerful of the televised representations of violence fell out of the framework of traditional military combat.⁴⁹ Russian television, the printed media and western documentary journalists all focused consistently on the same images: the corpses of civilians killed by aerial bombardment, the decomposing bodies of Russian soldiers abandoned by their own army to scavenging dogs, anxious Russian women travelling to the Caucasus in search of missing sons and husbands conscripted into the war, and the

⁴⁶ Russian television in fact went beyond accepted international conventions in their representation of violence. As Mikhail Zotov observed in *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 3 February 1995, (republished in *Zhurnalisty na chechenskoj voine*, 172), “according to international conventions it is not recommended to show blown-up bodies in wartime reportage. But that is the face of war.” However Oleg Dobrodeev, news director for the television company NTV, denied that the TV footage of Chechen conflict was more graphic than that of other post-Soviet conflicts (*Zhurnalisty na chechenskoj voine*, 212). From the perspective of the end of the decade one wonders now if Russian media coverage of the Chechen war was the culmination of a historical period which is already receding.

⁴⁷ *International Herald Tribune*, 1 April 1996. For a more detailed analysis of the nuances of CNN coverage as a post-Soviet media model see Schwach, “Television, Chechnya, and National Identity,” 85ff.

⁴⁸ Powerful examples of this paradox are the British documentary “The Betrayed” (dir. Clive Gordon, 1995), and the recent Dutch documentary film *Amsterdam Global Village* (1996) by Johan van der Keuken (U.S. Premiere at the 1998 San Francisco International Film Festival). In the latter film a Chechen businessman now resident in the Netherlands is shown watching the Chechen war on television in Amsterdam. The media coverage moves him to narrate the story of his family, as well as his own life: his boyhood in the Northern Caucasus, his absorption into the Soviet system as a member of the secret service and his pursuit of a business career abroad during and after perestroika. He finally returns as a patriot with a conscience to Chechnya on a humanitarian mission.

⁴⁹ An estimated proportion of civilian casualties is offered by V. V. Serebriannikov, “Voina v Chechne: porozhdenie smuty,” *Chechentsy. Istoriia i sovremennost'*, 21.

hostage crisis in Budennovsk that transfixed the nation for several days. These images readily correspond to the following dispatch sent from Grozny in December 1995 by Russia's Commissioner for Human Rights Sergei Kovalëv, who spent much of the war denouncing the outrages perpetrated by the Yeltsin government:

Every day we see planes dropping bombs on residential areas with complete impunity. Every day we see the bodies of civilians torn apart by these bombs, some without heads, others without legs. Many places in the city of Grozny resemble the section of Stalingrad left unrepaired in order to serve as a war memorial.... Anna Volkova, a very old woman, is sitting on the sidewalk with the few possessions she saved from her fourth floor apartment which was destroyed by a bomb. Next to her lie the bodies of her son and daughter-in-law covered by a blanket. Volkova is sitting on a stool behind a small cart covered with a flannel blanket — passersby leave money for the funeral on it. During the attack, a house on Central Square, not far from the President's Palace, was set on fire. Alexander Pavlovich, a World War II veteran, managed to lower himself on sheets from his fourth-floor apartment to the third floor where he was saved by Chechen militiamen. Neither he nor the militiamen were able to rescue his wife, who was paralyzed. She cried out: "Save me! Save me!" before she burned to death. Grozny's ruins are overloaded with bodies - the bodies of Russian soldiers. Stray dogs gnaw at the dead.⁵⁰

Such statements, and their corresponding images, need to be analyzed both for their performative value and their content. Valerii Simonov described the impact this kind of reporting had on the Russian public in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*: "Everyone is making out as if there are two or even several truths. But that is not the case. The truth is speaking either through Deputy Sergei Kovalëv... or through Valentin Sergeev, leader of the Temporary Information Center attached to the Russian Federal Government. One of them is lying. Anyone who has seen the footage on NTV can have no doubt who."⁵¹ Simonov's comment reveals a fundamental shift in the place of the independent witness in Russian society: not only did media coverage provide dramatic visual corroboration of what the witness claimed to see—television was in fact his new medium of operation. Like the creative writer and the political dissident before him, the television journalist had come to embody the national conscience. As Ellen Mickiewicz observes: "The place reserved for the poet-seer of nineteenth-century Russia had been filled by the anchor-prophet at the end of the twentieth."⁵²

Kovalev's statement is also instructive for its content, which typifies the discourse of the alternative media. We should note the highlighting of Russian civilian and military casualties, seen here as victims, rather than agents, of Russian coercion. While not inaccurate as an account of the bombing of Grozny (the remaining civilians were in the

⁵⁰ On 15 December 1995 Kovalev led a five-man group to Chechnya to monitor the war. Kovalev's statement is quoted by Edward Kline in "The Conflict in Chechnya," <http://www.wdu.com/asf/chechbp.html>.

⁵¹ Valerii Simonov, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 5 January 1995.

⁵² Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, 266.

main Russian pensioners), an updated version of the romantic iconography of Russian victimhood played a more general role in the way violence was represented publicly during the recent Chechen war. In the decaying bodies of young Russian soldiers, as in the terrified faces of the Russian hostages at Budennovsk seen on television, the Corpse and the Captive lived again. These and other images became visual symbols for what was effectively an emerging civil society in Russia. The Chechen conflict was in general a powerful stimulus in shaping and articulating patterns of public opinion and response that were programmatically hostile to the government. As M. Molostvov, a deputy to the State Duma, was to claim: “The civic courage of the soldiers’ mothers, the steadfastness of journalists in telling the truth, the polls taken by institutes surveying public opinion showing that the average citizens of Russia are opposed to resolution of the Chechen problem by force, the anti-war movement which is attracting the most diverse kinds of political organizations - all of this is the *potential of Russian democracy*....”⁵³

Opposition to the war, and the civil society it represented, was by no means exclusively democratic or ideologically uniform: the right-wing nationalist media were equally vehement in denouncing both the government and the Chechen militias, while the liberal media typically struggled to reconcile a westernizing and reformist vision with a truncated post-imperial sense of Russia’s territorial integrity.⁵⁴ Common to both perspectives, however, was a palpable desire to distinguish the Russian *people* as a third party to the war, distinct both from the Chechen insurgents and the intrigues of those in power. As bluntly put by V.V. Serebriannikov, “The war in Chechnya is being waged not by the people of Russia but by the Russian political regime, to defend the interests of the ‘New Russians.’”⁵⁵

This triangular conflict—between Chechens, Russians, and the post-Soviet state—was made dramatically evident in the widely televised Budennovsk hostage crisis of June

⁵³ M. Molostvov, “Predislovie” to S. N. Iushenkov, *Voina v Chechne i problemy rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti i demokratii* (Moscow: [no publisher indicated], 1995), 5.

⁵⁴ A sense of the range of ideological opinions on the Caucasus in the independent Russian printed media - from liberal anti-imperialism to chauvinist revanchism - can be had by perusing the following articles: Irina Dement’eva, “Khotiat li russkie Chechni,” *Izvestiia*, 17 January, 1995 and Aleksandr Borodai, “Vpered! voina! Ocherk geopolitiki Zakavkaz’ia i Kavkaza,” *Zavtra*, no. 35 (September 1997): 1, 5. Cf. also Vladimir Dediakin, “Chechnia i ‘Zaklatie Bismarka,’” *Segodnia*, 20 January 1995, who bemoans the fact that “the best representatives in the Russian intelligentsia remain trapped within ‘imperial’ thinking....The main difficulty... is the narrowness of state thinking on the part of the Russian elite. Judging by the publications in the central press, neither the patriotic nationalists nor the liberal reformist westernizers realize that the Russian nation is undergoing a profound crisis and is incapable of offering an attractive model of social behavior to surrounding ethnic groups.” In terms of public opinion, observers and pollsters acknowledged a certain level of every-day nationalism (*bytovoi natsionalizm*) among Russians interviewed. Yet despite the tendentiously titled TV broadcast “Nashi” (“Our Boys”) hosted by ultranationalist media icon Aleksandr Nevzorov, it was precisely the distinction between “us” and “them” that was to become blurred. “Us” often became localized into concern for Russian boys conscripted and serving in the Russian army, perceived to be as much as victims as heroes, as well as for the civilian population of Chechnya, which included a significant Russian community. Similarly, hostility was directed at the Russian government and military authorities as well as at the Chechen opposition. Cf. Nikolai Petrov, “Regiony ne bezmolstvuiut,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20 January 1995. All in all, press observers were united in criticizing the government for choosing to resolve an internal political problem by military means; the weak point in their critique was that, while generally committed to the territorial integrity of Russia, they assumed a “civilizational difference” between the Russian and Northern Caucasian peoples. The postwar period has been characterized by a deromanticization of Chechen culture in the Russian media, even though the escalation of lawlessness and kidnapping is still interpreted as a “conflict of civilisations,” in Samuel Huntington’s phrase, rather than as a contingent response to a profound political crisis. See for example Igor’ Rotar’, “Konflikt tsivilizatsii na severnom Kavkaze,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 May 1998; or the more moderate Galina Koval’skaia, “Kavkaz i plenniki,” *Itogi* (24 March 1998), 60-63. My thanks also to Georgi Derluguian of Northwestern University for his insights into the ideological configurations of the period.

⁵⁵ V. V. Serebriannikov, “Voina v Chechne: porozhdenie smuty,” 17.

1995. In one of the most extraordinary events of the war, the young Chechen commander Shamil Basaev, evidently acting independently of the Chechen rebel leadership, took a large band of men one hundred miles into Russian territory in what was understood to be a possible suicide mission aimed at forcing Moscow to the negotiating table. Cornered by the Russian police at the edge of the town of Budennovsk, Basaev and his men retreated to the town hospital where they held at least 1200 hostages in a four-day stand-off. Russian special forces made more than one unsuccessful attempt to storm the hospital—a strategy that seems inconceivable given the numbers caught inside—killing captors and captives in equal numbers. Televised around the clock, the spectacle of Russian troops firing at Russian hostages inside the hospital deepened the schism that had emerged between the Russian public and the government during the Chechen war, at the very moment when assertions of Chechen banditry might have been confirmed. The unprecedented nature of the terrorist attack did little to deflect the burden of responsibility from the Russian state, whose bumbling, highhanded response certainly exacerbated the crisis. As Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal note, “dramatic television pictures of women hostages screaming and waving sheets at the hospital windows had already been transmitted round the world and shaken the whole country. It was an absolute public relations disaster for the government. Suddenly Russian forces were seen as the brutal ones.”⁵⁶ Reeling from media exposure, the government was compelled to abandon the use of force in favor of a negotiated settlement. With President Yeltsin away in Canada, the task of dialoguing with Basaev fortunately fell to Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, who successfully negotiated the release of the captives on live television.

It is tempting to view Budennovsk as an updated restaging of *Prisoner of the Caucasus*. The Chechen leader Basaev readily embodied the Noble Savage: feared, to be sure, but nonetheless admired for his audacity; an outlaw, but one sympathetically viewed by many of the hostages themselves, who seemed more dismayed by “their” government’s response than by the actions of their captors.⁵⁷ The Captive, however, was now a collective figure: no longer the romantic artist isolated in his dissent, it had become the Russian people of the post-Soviet era, helpless perhaps but no longer cowed, with television permitting a ready identification between those trapped inside the hospital and the viewing public at large.

Yet if the Budennovsk crisis, not unlike the literary allegories of the Captive before it, confirmed the symbolism of the Russian nation in captivity, it cannot be said that the role of the Russian state in this parable remained entirely static. Weakened by internal factionalism and hence unable to speak as one, the government was able to pursue a disastrous military response and then in part redeem its reputation through the example of the prime minister’s negotiated settlement. As televised, the Budennovsk crisis constituted a “civic spectacle” with multiple and contradictory meanings:⁵⁸ the biggest

⁵⁶ Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya. Calamity in the Caucasus*, 270.

⁵⁷ On being released, many of the hostages reportedly defended the Chechen terrorists: see Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya. Calamity in the Caucasus*, 273.

⁵⁸ The description of Budennovsk as a “civic spectacle” belongs to Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels*, 262. Schwach has suggested that Chernomyrdin’s resolution of the Budennovsk crisis allowed the media to generate, at least for some months, a new national narrative of Russia as a nascent democracy; “Television, Chechnya, and National Identity,” 89-91.

terrorist act of the century bringing visibility if not credit to the Chechen cause, the umpteenth example of Russian state brutality, and finally an unexpected confirmation of a youthful if clumsy Russian democracy.

The Truths of the Dead

What has been said of Budennovsk might be said more generally of the media war that accompanied the Chechen conflict. The spectacles of violence and death enacted daily on television confirmed different truths to different constituencies. To the West, the new candor of the Russian press, however negatively it reflected on the government, provided some paradoxical reassurance of Russia's place in the globalizing world economy, in which Chechen independence, and even the final rout of the Russian military, mattered less than the continuing marketization of Russia's resources, including the media. To the Chechens, the war's media visibility compensated for its geographical remoteness, allowing them to make their case to a national and global audience at a time when their military triumph was by no means assured. To Russians, the spectacle of the war confirmed the disarray of the government and the military, even as it confirmed an iconography of Russian victimhood that separated the Russian people from the actions of the state.

In this sense, the media inherited the prophetic function formerly accorded in Russia to the artist. The media, like the poet of yesterday, could utter truths which belied the official version of events. Yet much had also been transformed with the change in medium. In Russian romanticism (Lermontov is the paradigmatic figure but his posture was subsequently adopted by many), the relationship between the aesthetic and the political was generally mediated by the lyric hero, whose cultural allegories corresponded to a deeply subjective alienation, while their relevance for a wider civil society remained largely implicit or coded. With the emergence of the independent media and civic organizations as well as the absence of direct censorship, the unequal bipolar struggle between artist and the state was replaced by infinitely more complex ebbs and flows of signification. Having lost its monopoly over the circulation of information, the government still continued to harass journalists, manipulate and even block the flow of information (learning its lesson from Budennovsk, the government was more effective in excluding the media from filming the second hostage crisis of January 1996 in Kizliar/Pervomaiskoe). The overall impression created by heightened media and public interest in the war was one of information saturation, but one that left as many questions in place as answers. News and images circulated, but seemed to exceed or fall short of a graspable meaning. Catastrophe was dramatically visible, but - at least on the Russian side - accompanied by a sense of indeterminacy, as if the spectacles of death afforded by the war did not corroborate a coherent wider narrative or national self-image. The early scenes of the Russian army bombing the largely Russian civilian population remaining in Grozny seemed to dramatize the meaninglessness of the war as a whole. With the distinction between "us" and "them" repeatedly blurred or shifting, the dead could not readily be justified as a national sacrifice or even as a markedly alien adversary.

In the nineties, Russians began for the first time to speak publicly and directly about the human and psychic cost of empire.⁵⁹ Alienated from politics and ideology but taking advantage of the weakening of state control, civic groups and non-government organizations began to organize around the question of military accountability - for the dead as well as for the still living. Given the increasing collusion since the last presidential elections of 1996 between the press, the present government and private financial concerns, the future of political pluralism in Russia may well depend more on these civic organizations than on the electronic media.⁶⁰

Human rights groups such as Memorial, or civic movements involving the mothers of conscripted soldiers, while limited in terms of political influence and mass participation, can still be read as an index of how far the Russian debate on interethnic relations has come in the last decade.⁶¹ No longer tied to the opaque allegories of the Russian poets, these groups, and with them the debate at large, have entered into a direct confrontation with the post-Soviet state. Yet in at least one way the position of many civic organizations remains indebted to the coded politics of the literary tradition: their polemic, like those of Russia's classical writers, has not been radically anti-imperialist. Rather, they frequently prefer to "domesticate" the crisis of empire by focusing primarily on the abuses of power perpetrated by the state against Russians themselves. In this sense,

⁵⁹ Past history offered plenty of precedents for Russia's violent response to the Chechen revolt, but little in the way of a deeper justification for Russia's long presence in the Caucasus, beyond the inexorable logic of territorial expansion, dictated by geopolitical rather than economic (let alone ameliorative) concerns. Interesting in this regard is Ia. Gordin's article "Chto uveklo Rossiia na Kavkaz. Zametki ob ideologii Kavkazskoi voiny," (What Drew Russia to the Caucasus. Notes on the Ideology of the Caucasian War), *Zvezda*, no. 10 (October 1996): 94-111. Returning to the nineteenth century Gordin finds little in the way of a profound ideological or historiographical rationalization of Russia's role in the Caucasus among the historians or statesmen of the time. Even after studying the various rationales offered, Gordin believes that a moral vacuum existed, filled only by the logic of the imperial state, which remains to this day. Gordin, however, seems largely unable to grasp the literary contribution to this debate (dismissed on 110); his limits as a literary critic may also reflect the ambiguities (and hence the ideological vagueness) of this tradition. Gordin's failure is somewhat redressed by the Ukrainian nationalist Ivan Dziuba's book "*Kavkaz*" *Tarasa Shevchenko na fone neprekhodiashego proshlogo. K 150-letiiu so dnia napisania poëmy "Kavkaz"* (Kiev: Derzhavna biblioteka Ukraini dlia iunatstva, 1996), perhaps the main contemporary book in Russian to address Russia's nineteenth-century debates on the Caucasus in light of the present.

⁶⁰ See Andrei Fadin, "In Russia, Private Doesn't Mean Independent," *Transitions*, October 1997 (also at <http://www.ijt.cz/transitions/archive1.html>): "Because the press has been almost entirely taken over by the banks..., independence of media and ultimately freedom of speech - one of the few indisputable achievements of the post-Soviet regime - has been seriously deformed. "

⁶¹ As examples of independent civic initiative one might mention the work of the human-rights group Memorial in documenting the massacre that took place in Samashki in April 1997. Memorial performed the painstaking task of interviewing survivors, photographing the site, establishing a probable narrative of events, and compiling a verifiable list of the dead. In calling the Russian state to account for an atrocity of the present (and not an outrage from the Communist past), Memorial's published report constituted a significant precedent, one usefully contrasted with the scandalously biased conclusions of the Parliamentary Commission on the Chechen War: see *Vsemi imeiushchimisia sredstvami... Operatsiia MVD RF v sele Samashki 7-8 1995g.* (Moscow: Pravozashchitnyi tsentr "Memorial": 1995). The report's conclusions are generally confirmed by the British television documentary on the Chechen war, *The Betrayed* (dir. Clive Gordon, 1995). An edited redaction of the report of the Russian Parliamentary Commission, interpolated with highly tendentious commentary, is also available: *Kommissiia Govorukhina* (Moscow: Laventa, 1995). The Govorukhin Commission was a heavily politicized exercise that asserted the priorities of the Duma majority: to absolve the Russian army of any responsibility while laying the blame for the war almost equally at the door of Dudaev and Yeltsin. One might also point to the emergence of the mothers of Russian conscripts as a social force. Appalled by the systemic violence and institutional decay that permeated the army, and concerned about their sons' forced participation in a war for which they, like the nation at large, were unprepared, the soldiers' mothers became one of the more visible groups in Russia's emerging civil society. Shrewdly relying on the symbolic place accorded to motherhood in Russian society, the soldiers' mothers were able to portray their critique of militarism as a provocative but readily grasped extension of the maternal instinct. See the website for the Soldiers' Mothers Organization of St. Petersburg, <http://www.openweb.ru/windows/smo/smo.htm>; see also Amy Caiazza, "Russia Meets Its Matriarchs," *Transitions* (January 1998) (also at <http://www.ijt.cz/transitions/archive1.html>).

the romantic figure of the Captive, who falls victim both to the enemy and to his own political system, continues to dominate the Russian imagination.⁶²

In exploring a prolonged political tragedy whose textual record stretches from classical Russian poetry to contemporary debates in the national media, it is perhaps appropriate to conclude with a glance at a work that generically embraces the entire tradition. Sergei Bodrov's film *Kavkazskii plennik* (released in English as *The Prisoner of the Mountains*) transposes the basic plot of the Pushkin/Tolstoi story onto a contemporary setting, while sharpening, in a typically post-Soviet fashion, its critical message. Bodrov's film is in many ways a powerful fusion of the literary tradition with modern media culture. It contains documentary-style footage of army life, with topical references to the role of the soldiers' mothers, institutional corruption, and the unpreparedness of Russian soldiers for combat duty. These contemporary references contrast sharply with a markedly romantic rendering of the life of the North Caucasian highlanders. In a media release Bodrov makes the improbable claim that the highlanders "have lived through the Soviet era untouched by time. They live as they did one hundred years ago."⁶³ Erasing the complex two-century long encounter of the highlanders with Russian and Soviet modernity, Bodrov positions the local inhabitants in a kind of ethnographic time-warp: their struggle with Russia, now as before, can do no more than exemplify the perennial allegory of the Noble Savage and his Captive.

In the film's final scene, the Russian soldier Vania, who has been held prisoner in a North Caucasian mountain village, is being led to his execution. He is made to stand at the edge of a sharp drop with his back to his captor, who then shoots randomly into the air instead of killing him. In a magical-realist twist, Vania sees an apparition of his dead comrade telling him that he has been spared. He then spots a fleet of helicopters, hailing them and thus identifying himself with the Russian side. This identification is imperiled as he realizes that his army will not in turn identify him, and is indeed bent on perpetuating a conflict that he and his captor have already resolved on a personal level.

The film's dénouement, in which Vania is spared only to see the larger war continue, reverberates with the richly symbolic ambiguities of the nineteenth-century literary tradition. For much of the film, the protagonist is the Russian Captive, a victim rather than an agent of the war. In the final execution scene, he acquires the richly allegorical resonances of Lermontov's *Corpse*: hovering between brute matter and consciousness, his body becomes a symbol of the Russian nation and its imperial burden. Finally, his erstwhile captor is once more the Noble Savage: in sparing Vania's life, he shows himself capable of a gesture of magnanimity that morally redeems him and his people. The violent logic of the Russian state deepens the political alienation of the Russian, while eliciting the native nobility of the highlander.

⁶² I do not believe my point is substantially disproved by the Memorial inquiry into the Samashki massacre (see the previous note): most of the human rights activism arising from the war took no position on Chechen independence, and simply opposed a military resolution to the crisis, which was assumed by most to be an internal Russian affair.

⁶³ *Prisoner of the Mountains* (Orion Pictures Corporation, 1996), 6. The film, we are told, was shot in Daghestan; its immediate point of reference was the Chechen war, but Bodrov's intentions were also more universal.

This closing scene of *Prisoner of the Caucasus* might be seen as a translation of the recent Chechen war into the symbolic idiom of Russian romanticism. Vania, and with him the Russian people, here occupy a liminal space. Like Lermontov's wounded soldier, Vania is poised at the threshold between life and death, with his back to the living and facing the dead. No longer captive but not yet identified and rescued by "his" army, Vania might be seen as the Russian national body. 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.

One such means was the emergence, in Russia and Chechnya, of a new informational culture. This culture was marked by the coexistence of several discourses. An older romantic tradition had codified the alienating impact of the modernizing state upon both Russian and highlander, which it had sought to compensate through the notions of civilizational conflict, ethno-national identity, and the dream of collective and personal freedom. The disjunctive relationship between the Russian people and the state, already palpable in the alienation of the romantic poet, definitively surfaced in the post-Soviet era. With Russia and its state forced open by the pressures of privatization, new technologies and international financial institutions, the older tension between nation, state and the colonial periphery was confronted with newer, distinctly postnational patterns of spatialization and circulation. Press freedom, one of Russia's greatest contemporary achievements, brought with it a ready spectacularization of violence, a quotidian imagery through which the Russian and Chechen people could envisage their opposition to the state, whether in the name of universal human rights and national self-determination, or the collective memory of a common Soviet past.

Yet the same imagery, and the weakening of state control to which it testified, also suggested a loosening of the internal coherence of received ideas, experiences and narratives, such as national sovereignty, great-power chauvinism, and the pervasive nostalgia for a shared Soviet heritage. On television as on the streets, Russians and Chechens saw a deterritorialized world in which people, images, money and weapons flowed unimpeded across increasingly blurred boundaries. Chechnya quickly became one more instance of that interpretive crisis that is "Russia in the nineties:" rival explanatory narratives of the crisis continue to circulate, many of which exceed the familiar binary model of empire and colony.⁶⁴ During the war and even more so in its aftermath, civic protest and debate seem to have given way to a deep popular apathy before the apparent senselessness of history and the corruptibility of political institutions.

In the present as often in the past, Russia's civic culture remains a response to power rather than a critique of it. Specifically, it seems as yet unwilling to extend its own alienation from the state into a systemic critique of its mechanisms, from the powerful vestiges of imperial thinking to the newer symbioses of power and money. Perhaps we

⁶⁴ For a discussion of rival explanations of the Chechen crisis see Tishkov et al, *Chechenskii krizis*, 25-34, republished and extended in Tishkov, *The Mind Aflame*, 182-227; Iushenkov, *Voina v Chechne*, 15, and D. B. Malysheva, *Konflikty na Kavkaze: regional'noe i mezhdunarodnoe izmerenie* (Moscow: IMEMO RAN, 1996), 26ff.

can read the following statement, made by one Russian newspaper editor during the height of the Chechen war, as a tacit acknowledgement of this limitation: “Despite the fact that the press shows dead bodies, and the cruelty, and the senselessness of certain actions, perhaps even of the entire operation, it cannot shatter the internal inertia of the war....”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Aleksandr Il'in, editor in chief of *Pravda*, “Osveshchenie voyny v Chechne i politika ‘massovoi informatsii.’ Stenogramma ‘kruglogo stola’ Rossiisko-Amerikanskogo informatsionnogo press-tsentra (Moscow, 9 February 1995),” *Zhurnalisty na chechenskoj voine*, 219.