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

Introduction

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Presence and Absence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Contributions to this Special Issue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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