



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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

What's in a Name?

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

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

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

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

Unsurprisingly, the spread of these patriotic *topoi* gained momentum after the French Revolution and particularly during the Napoleonic wars. For instance, in 1807 Vladislav Ozerov spoke of the Russian God in his tragedy *Dmitrii Donskoi*, in which the battle at Kulikovo Field and the corresponding patriotic legend at first glance merely provide a historical background for a sentimental love story. However, *Dmitrii Donskoi* was staged soon after the Battle of Eylau (1807), when its patriotic ethos was particularly apposite³ and the might of the Russian God seemed to be directed not only against the 'false' religion of the medieval Tatars and Mongols, but, by extension, against the secularism and civic nationalism of the French. [7]

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

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

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

The storm of the year 1812 [9]
 began – who helped us then?
 People's wrath,
 Barclay⁵, the winter, or the Russian God?

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

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

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

From Poetics to Politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You all do not belong to Russian people (lit. “you are non-Russian people”)! [27]
 [...]

 Your pointless rage will calm down,
 Your treacherous tongues will fall silent,
 [Because] holy Rus’ is still strong and firm,
 And the Russian God is still great!

In Search of Pure Russianness

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

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

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

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

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

Having crossed the Volga, one may find himself right in Holy Rus'! The spoken language here is purely Russian, the clothes are Russian too – feriaz' and kokoshniks with pearls are beautiful as fair plaits are! The cleanness inside the houses is astonishing!

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

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

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



Figure 1 Mikhail Nesterov “Holy Rus” (1901). Source: Wikimedia Commons

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

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

[35]

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

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

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

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

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

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

This strange formula, which seems ubiquitous in the contemporary popular writings, blogs, and songs about Holy Rus'¹⁶, originates from Rilke's "literary fairy tale" (*Kunstmärchen*) with a title "How Treason Came to Russia", which belongs to the prose collection "Stories of God" (1900). However, in the original text this statement lacks its laconic brevity; on the contrary, it results from a lengthy dialogue between the narrator (recognizable as the author himself) and his friend Ewald. The latter is paralyzed and is therefore doomed to spend all his time motionless by the window of his house. Ewald is curious about the narrator's recent travel to Russia and is eager to learn more about this exotic and distant country, yet already the question about Russia's borders in the East and in the North remains unanswered. In fact, the narrator evades the question, saying that¹⁷ [40]

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Collapse

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion of Holy Rus’ becomes a literary commonplace which may refer to a myth (both romantic and nationalist) or a conservative utopia (which provides the Russian monarchy with additional legitimacy), but which also functions as a common denomination for a multifaceted intellectual mission to transfigure Russia’s increasingly secular culture into a religious one (Strickland 2013, 53). This anti-modernist gesture resonates with Russia’s shifting self-positioning as an empire and a nation-state. If, following Benedict Anderson, we define Russian nationalism as an effort at „stretching the short, tight, skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire“ (Anderson 1991, 86), then the poetic sacralization of geographical space was certainly one of the most successful of its poetic techniques. However, the sacralization of Russian national territory, as it can be observed in the literary discourse about Holy Rus’, was always accompanied by the sacralization of the Empire, with Fedor Tiutchev’s “Russian geography” (“Russkaia geografiiia”, 1849) probably the most compelling literary example²¹:

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

Poetically overamplified and geographically overstretched, this heavenly empire however did not survive World War I and collapsed in 1917, burying the established literary paradigms of national holiness under its vast debris. The farewell to the previous poetic tradition of nation building was neither romantic nor sentimental. In „The Twelve“ (1918), Aleksandr Blok puts the following words into the mouth of a Bolshevik soldier²²:

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

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

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

Wood-hutted,
Fat-assed Rus'!

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

Being virtually banished from Soviet Russia for its incompatibility with Marxist ideology, Holy Rus' as a literary trope and metahistorical concept survived in the Russian *émigré* communities of Western and Central Europe, where it inspired a significant amount of publications, even though one of the most famous Russian *émigré* philosophers, Nikolai Berdiaev, described the very idea of Holy Rus' and the respective literary production as “deadened tradition” (омертвевшее предание) already in 1915.²³ [57]

Yet, in the early 1930s, the old imperial paradigms were picked up again in Moscow itself in order to remaster the newly established Soviet Union not only as the bearer of a revolutionary idea but also as a state with a pronounced missionary consciousness (prophetically identified by Blok in “The Twelve”), hegemonic aspirations and with a claim for a superpower status. The new Soviet anthem (written around 1938 and adopted in 1944), which replaced the left-wing “Internationale”, already in its first lines refers to the archaic idea of Rus' as a guarantee for the viability of the Soviet state²⁴: [58]

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

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

Holy Rus' after 1991

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 3 “Holy Rus’ and Koshchei’s Kingdom: the Basis for Russian Spiritual Renaissance” by Genadii Ziuganov (book cover).

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

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

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

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

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

The Patriarch is the custodian of the internal unity of the Church and, together

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[78]

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

[79]

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

[80]

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

[81]

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Final Remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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