Secular Victims, Religious Aggressors, Mystical Holy Men: Muslims, Islam, and Contemporary Russian Prose

Program Dates May 21, 2014-August 20, 2014
Moscow, Russian Federation

Research Abstract:
Since 1991 Russian literature has envisioned the nation’s Muslim minorities and Islam in contradictory ways. This is particularly striking in how the intelligentsia, which among its liberal members professes tolerance, depicts this faith and its adherents. These attitudes are evident in the fiction and non-fiction of several authors and revolve around three putative traits: the secular, the radical, and the mystical. Liudmila Ulitskaia, contemporary Russia’s most important author, supports some ethnic Muslims (secularized Tartars) while fearing others (‘radicalized’ Chechens). In contemporary culture discussion of Muslims (particularly those from the Caucasus and Central Asia) is inseparable from debates over immigration and fears over shifting demographics. These two factors guide images of secularism as they appear in the writing of Andrei Volos. The author Il’dar Abuziarov, however, emphasizes connections between Islam and mysticism. Ulitskaia, while providing nuanced images of the image of Christianity and Judaism, criticizes Islam as monolithic. All three authors see this faith as fundamentally different from Russian culture, despite centuries of contact.
Research Goals:

Before coming to Moscow, I had envisioned that Title VIII funding would allow me to build on my substantial previous research on Ulitskaia. I planned to examine more broadly how the intelligentsia, which has traditionally expressed itself via literature, portrays Islam and Russia’s Muslims. I intended to accomplish this by looking at novels, stories, and non-fiction published by members of the intelligentsia. In constructing this research proposal I assumed a dichotomy between positive or sympathetic images of secularized Muslims versus negative images of radicalized Muslims, a dichotomy reflecting the problem of Orientalism that Edward Said and Adeeb Khalid describe. (As the section on research findings notes, this approach proved too simple.) Discussions about Muslims often focus on two groups: Tatars and Chechens. Tatars, who have long been assimilated into Russian culture (and empire), are considered to be the most ‘benign’ of these minorities—indeed, until the twin bombings in Kazan (2012), the region of Tatarstan was almost ignored in the ongoing debate about the role of Muslims in the Russian Federation. Chechens, however, have received a far less charitable image among the prose and non-fiction of the intelligentsia. Due to the brutal military campaigns of the nineteenth century, Susan Layton observes that even before the Soviet era this group was marked as a hostile ‘Other’. The 1990s-early 2000s wars in Chechnya and terrorism in Moscow and in southern Russia added to the suspicion of Chechens. I planned to use contact with local specialists and interviews with authors and critics to supplement materials gathered while in Moscow. Together these activities would allow me to give a nuanced overview of how the intelligentsia uses fiction and non-fiction to portray Islam and ethnic Muslims in Russia.
Research Activities:

Because of my previous familiarity with the work of Ulitskaia, my time in Moscow focused on looking at the writing of other authors from the intelligentsia. I quickly discovered that there was much more material on this subject than I had envisioned. Likewise, my emphasis on a division between images of secularized and radicalized Muslims oversimplified this group’s portrayal in contemporary Russian prose.

While I had been somewhat worried about the Russian media’s anti-Western campaign, I had no ‘anti-American’ experiences but was asked many times by various Russians (from friends to chance acquaintances on the street) to explain the US policy concerning Ukraine. This had an indirect impact on my research: in the 1990s and early 2000s, US critiques of Russian human rights abuses in Chechnya was a ‘hot button’ issue in conversations with Russians. The crisis in eastern Ukraine, however, rendered this previous controversy all but moot.

I obtained library passes from Moscow libraries: the Russian State Library (Lenin Library), the Russian State Historical Library, the Library for Foreign Literature, and the Institute for Scientific Information on the Social Sciences. I also met with several acquaintances and new contacts (discussed more under Co-Curricular Activity). These meetings provided invaluable guidance in terms of my research on contemporary Russian prose and its image of Islam and ethnic Muslim minorities in Russia, particularly concerning the ideas of the liberal intelligentsia.

Despite the tense relationship between the US and Russia, I found my Russian contacts (whether
previously unfamiliar or old friends) to be extremely helpful and generous with time and suggestions. As is often the case, their comments allowed me to question the ‘American’ biases in my research.

The conservative critic Elena Trofimova (Moscow State University) suggested that I contact the conservative author and essayist Elena Chudinova and Andrei Volos, an ethnic Russian and member of the liberal intelligentsia who lived in Tajikistan before fleeing during the 1990s civil war. Volos allowed me to interview him for an hour. This interview focused both on his novel *Moscow Mecca* (discussed below) but also on his previous prose dealing with the fate of Russians and Tajiks during the civil war. Volos is one of the few Russians—including those from the liberal intelligentsia—who voiced opposition to the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing involvement in eastern Ukraine. He argued (correctly, as events have proven) that the post-annexation Russian euphoria will lead to more serious consequences. This comment is intriguing because before the Ukraine crisis it was conflict with Islam and the Muslim world—not a neighboring Slavic nation—that was seen as a major threat to the stability of Russia. Volos recommended the novels of Il’dar Abuziarov, an ethnic Tatar from Nizhny Novgorod. Il’ia Kukulin (Higher School of Economics), a liberal scholar, also recommended reading Abuziarov during our long discussion over lunch and coffee.

The bulk of my time in Moscow was devoted to reading the prose of Volos and Abuziarov. Because Russian books quickly disappear from the shelves after being published, some of the materials were difficult to locate. The bookstores Biblio-Globus, Molodaia gvardiia, Dom knigi,
and Moskva in central Moscow were usually able to provide the volumes that I needed. Many sources were also available online, which was a pleasant surprise.

Along with the fiction of Abuziarov and Volos, I examined the writing of Chudinova, who lives in St. Petersburg. She has written a collection of essays dealing with the perceived Muslim threat to Western/Russian civilization: the volume is tellingly entitled *The White Man's Burden* (Bremia belykh, 2011). This echo of Rudyard Kipling suggests how some members of the Russian intelligentsia contextualize and rationalize its xenophobia, constructing it as a shared trait between ‘Europeanized’ Russia and the West as opposed to the allegedly uncivilized East. I was unable to locate her novel *The Mosque of Notre Dame* (Mechet’ Parizhskoi Bogomateri, 2005), which is a dystopian image of a West dominated by Muslims.

While reading the liberal newspaper *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, I accidentally discovered another useful source. The author Sergei Sokolkin has written the novel *Russian Nigger* (Ruskaia churka, 2014), which, as its luridly offensive and grammatically dubious title suggests, deals with a promiscuous Dagestani woman living in Russia and the turbulent 1990s. This work also fits into the stereotypes that the conservative intelligentsia harbors concerning Muslim minorities.

**Important Research Findings:**

Given that my research in Moscow focused on the authors Volos and Abuziarov, summarizing their works helps to introduce my research findings. Volos, in his novel *Moscow Mecca* (Maskavskaja mekka, 2003), creates a double dystopian plot set in Russia after a prolonged civil
war. In one plot, a weary and impoverished denizen of Maskav (the Tajik name for Moscow) gets involved in an abortive rebellion against the Russian Orthodox and Islamic secular oligarchs ruling the city. Given that beginning in the 1990s Tajiks flooded Moscow as marginalized migrant workers, Volos’s novel has resonance for both average readers and politicians (the latter have alternately fanned and quenched anti-Muslim sentiment in the Russian capital). The image of Maskav as divided between the wealthy and poor also suggests both the chaos and poverty of the 1990s and the increasingly expensive city center. Volos, having worked as a realtor in the 1990s, has an ‘inside view’ of the transformation of the city, which an influx of Muslim migrants has also influenced. Indeed, in 2014 I have noticed many more Muscovites of Central Asian descent than during previous visits. This caused me to realize that any discussion of Muslims in Russia must include Tajiks along with Tatars and those from the Caucasus.

The second plot of Volos’s novel takes place in Gumkrai, which Kukulin correct labels a grotesque (and darkly hilarious) parody of the worst aspects of Soviet culture: “Gum” is a perversion of the Russian word for “humanism,” and “krai” is one of the variants for “region.” Gumkrai is engaged in an ongoing war with Maskav. During his interview with me, Volos noted that the Maskav plot was added after the Gumkrai plot, which explains the strange and unsuccessful overall structure of the novel. The author notes that he created the second plot to make the novel more relevant to readers: after 1991, anti-Soviet critique was no longer topical. Volos’s realization that he needed to update his book’s themes suggests an obvious but crucial factor that the critic Andrew Wactel explores: after the collapse of the USSR, writers had to redefine themselves and their prose in order to remain relevant to readers.
Volos’s tactic worked. *Moscow Mecca* links Muslim migrants, an overcrowded metropolis, and the diminished role of the ordinary Russian—despite Volos’s liberal political views, these all suggest longstanding worries about changing demographics in first the USSR and now the Russian Federation. Serguei Oushakine sees these as a component of the “patriotism of despair” dominating the nation in the 1990s.

Abuziarov’s novel *Mutabor* (2012) is more difficult to summarize. Two major plots come together as a Central Asian migrant returns to his native Kashevar (a fictional nation that is a blend of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan). He has assumed the identity of a Westerner sent to Kashevar by an NGO to document anti-government protests (a clear reference to Russian beliefs that the US is behind the ‘color revolutions’, not to mention the Maidan movement). *Mutabor* combines elements of Sufi mysticism, the mystery novel (*detektiv*), and political satire (in particular of the brutal Kashevar regime). Abuziarov likewise includes some moments that fondly recall the Soviet past, which is contrasted to the uncertainty, crime, and poverty of Russia and Kashevar in the 2000s.

Before beginning this research project, I was already familiar with the ambivalence that Ulitskaia ascribes to Muslim minorities in her prose and interviews. She distinguishes between Tatars (whom she sees as secularized victims of Stalinist policies) and Chechens (a group described as violent, radicalized, and primitive). This second portrayal is analogous to her depictions of Islam, which she decries as monolithic and intolerant, a generalization that is strikingly different from her nuanced images of Christianity and Judaism.
Together the works of Volos, Abuziarov, Ulitskaia and to a lesser extent the prose of Sokolkin and essays by Chudinova reveal that contemporary prose by both liberals and conservatives is deeply concerned by Muslim minorities living in Russia. Islam for its part is seen as irrational (even in a sympathetic light, as with Abuziarov’s images of the Sufi Mutabor sect). These authors reveal that contemporary prose is not focused on a dichotomy (the secular versus radical) but in fact has a tripartite way of looking at Islam and Russia’s Muslim: as secular, radical, or mystical. The addition of this third category has helped me better formulate the image of this faith and its believers. However, further work on this project must involve more familiarity with Sufism since it underlies the image of mysticism in Abuziarov’s *Mutabor*.

My time in Moscow was very useful in terms meeting face-to-face with authors and critics. Likewise, the synergy of observations in daily life, immersion in the cultural life of the city, and structured research helped advance my project.

**Policy Implications and Recommendations:**

As I have noted above, it is impossible to discover anything related to US policy without considering the fallout from Ukraine, which has created the worst attitudes towards the West that I have witnessed since first coming to Moscow in 1987. Because of the tensions between the US and Russia, policy recommendations should err on the side of subtlety and restraint. Russia’s long-simmering conflict with Islam and Muslims (particularly in Dagestan) has been temporarily eclipsed by the crisis in Ukraine. However, the complex cultural rifts between (Orthodox
Christian) Russians and their Muslim neighbors will remain a problem long after events in Kiev and Donetsk have faded from the headlines.

The US has few specialists dealing with Tatar, Dagestani, Chechen, and most other languages spoken by Muslims in Russia. (The situation with Tajik is slightly better.) While programs such as the Boren Award and Critical Languages Scholarships encourage study of these languages, there should be more Federal support for undergraduate and graduate programs focusing on Muslims in Russia. It is also disheartening that Boren Awards currently cannot be used in the Russian Federation.

Given the widespread perceived involvement of the US and CIA in liberal Russian NGOs, any funding from US non-profits given to NGOs in Russia must be handled carefully. Suspicion that NGOs act as foreign agents is not confined to the ignorant—I had several conversations with highly educated individuals who voiced this concern. This caveat includes Russian NGOs dealing with human rights in the North Caucasus and those aiding the many Muslim migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia in the Russian Federation.

Since literature continues to be a highly visible arena for debating politics and history in Russia, Department of Education and Department of State funding used for studying Russian authors is a solid investment in understanding that country’s assessment of its past and future. When educated Russians describe the ‘savagery’ of the Caucasus, for instance, they often cite A Hero of Our Time (Geroi nashego vremeni, 1840), a fictional account of a Russian officer in the Caucasus. (Margaret Ziolkowski provides an overview of these literary depictions in her
monograph comparing Russian images of the Chechens and American images of the Navajo.) To this end the US can ensure a strong group of regional experts by continuing to support programs such as the National Foreign Language Resource Centers and the Foreign Language Area Studies fellowships. (I myself benefited from three years of FLAS support, without which my graduate studies would have been impossible.)

Co-Curricular Activity:
My time in Moscow permitted me to speak face-to-face with authors and critics and, in one instance, the Moscow bureau chief of the New York Times. Thanks to Trofimova, the author and poet Svetlana Vasilenko, the geographer Mikhail Sigalov, and journalist Nadezhda Azhgikhina, I also attended various literary evenings at the Central House of Writers, the Central House of Journalists, and a local history museum in the Moscow suburb of Malakhovka. These helped me contextualize my research within trends in contemporary Russian literature and culture. During the past three months, I have discussed literature and culture with both scholars and ‘average’ citizens—given the hostility between Russia and the US it is imperative that Russians understand that Americans are well-read, cultured, and capable of expressing themselves in a foreign language.

Conclusions:
This project began as a discussion of secular victims versus religious aggressors; my research reveals it is in fact a division between secular victims, radical religious aggressors, and mystical
holy men. These are the dominant trends in the works of Ulitskaia, Volos, and Abuziarov as these three authors depict the intelligentsia’s image of Islam and Muslims in contemporary Russia. Ulitskaia creates a dichotomy between sympathy for secularized Tatars and fears of radicalized Chechens. Volos paints an original vision of dystopia combining secularized Islam and strong overtones of Yeltsin-era plutocracy. The third component—mysticism—shapes the positive image of Islamic figures in Abuziarov’s *Mutabor*.

Within this division between the secular, radical, and mystical, Ulitskaia, Volos, and Abuziarov argue that Islam and Muslims, while bordering and influencing Russian culture, remain fundamentally alien. Edith Clowes notes that Russian literature after 1991 demarcates the literal and geographical boundaries of Russia, in the process showing a concern for unruly territories on the margins or just beyond them (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ukraine). For Ulitskaia the idea of Muslims as ‘Other’ is inevitable when depicting Chechen extremists. Volos’s *Moscow Mecca* links the blending of Christian and Muslim cultures with an overcrowded city where ordinary people live estranged from one another; for Abuziarov, Muslim migrants are alienated and vulnerable outsiders in Russia’s largest cities.

Volos and Ulitskaia use Muslims and Islam as a literal and metaphorical subplot. In Ulitskaia’s *Medea and Her Children* (*Medea i ee deti*, 1996) and *The Big Green Tent* (*Zelenyi shater*, 2011), concern for deported Crimean Tatars supplement these novel’s larger examination of the injustices of Soviet policies. As Volos notes in his interview, for him the image of Muslims was a deliberate strategy to attract readers to a novel that, despite the author’s professed tolerance,
played on xenophobic concern over in-migration and the clash between a newly revitalized Islam in the former USSR and a resurgent Orthodoxy in Russia. In the case of Abuziarov’s *Mutabor*, Islam is also a subplot, but one whose sympathetic depiction provides a mystical key to reading the novel as a whole. Conducting research on Volos and Abuziarov during the fellowship period has helped me better conceptualize how the intelligentsia’s literary portrayals of Islam and Russian Muslims are divided into the secular, the radical, and the mystical.

**Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:**
As often happens with large projects, after arriving in Moscow I discovered that the material for my research is more extensive than previously imagined. During Fall 2014 I intend to write a rough draft of an article focusing on the novels *Moscow Mecca* and *Mutabor* and their images of Islam and Muslims in Russia as divided between the secular, the radical, and the mystical. I plan to submit this article to a peer-reviewed journal in the US. Together with my previous research on Ulitskaia, this article may be the genesis of a book project that would be the first to explore contemporary literature’s images of Islam and Muslim ethnic minorities in Russia. This volume would encompass not only the two novels *Moscow Mecca* and *Mutabor* but also the essays of Chudinova (*The White Man’s Burden*) and Sokolkin’s novel *Russian Nigger*. These four authors reflect the various depictions of Islam and Russia’s ethnic Muslims as they appear in works by the intelligentsia.
Bibliography


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