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SPECIAL ARTICLES

## **A Clash of Fictions: Geopolitics in Russian and Ukrainian Literature**

Yvonne Howell  
*(University of Richmond)*

### **An Overview: Geopolitics and Literature**

When the vast, multinational Soviet empire collapsed in 1991, the geopolitical structure it had struggled to maintain for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — often by means of brutal repression and forced remobilization of entire populations — proved itself in the eyes of many to be fatally out of sync with the epochal norm of the nation-state. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, people in many parts of the world had begun to “imagine themselves” as nations and to organize politically into states whose primary function would be to protect, nurture, and (in a kind of Romantic feedback loop) vindicate the existence of the “people” as a “nation.” In Eastern Europe, movements towards national self-determination began somewhat later — towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — and were notoriously aborted or suppressed by violent redistribution of power and territory in the aftermath of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution. As is well known, as the world’s first self-proclaimed communist state, the Soviet Union was ideologically committed to uniting the “workers of the world” on the basis of class interests rather than narrow ethnic or national identity; in practice, the USSR pursued different strategies in different periods to accommodate and/or manipulate the tension within its far-flung borders between national self-awareness and self-expression versus a collective, Soviet, supranational notion of belonging. It is axiomatic to Slavic Studies that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fictional literature and even academic histories of literature played a crucial role in articulating the contours of national and “Soviet” identity.<sup>1</sup>

At first, it seemed that the cultural and political importance of literature in Russia and Eastern Europe would be simply swept aside by the collapse of an ideology that relied on writers (and to some degree filmmakers and other artists) to reflect its version of reality to the masses. Even more damaging to the weight and prestige of serious literature, of course, was the abrupt introduction of free market capitalism into the formerly socialist countries, which (along with the rapid rise of new communication technologies) allowed people to purchase and consume entertainment in new ways. It would be a mistake, however, to miss the resurgence of literature's significance in the current conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Both "serious literature" and the popular "literary landscape" in Putin's Russia, on the one hand, and in contemporary Ukraine, on the other, are serving to diagnose the parameters of simmering conflict. In what follows, this paper will outline the bifurcation of geopolitical ideologies since 2008 into two opposed trends: in Russia, the official discourse of Putin's third term presidency is one of *civilizational identity* based on a revived notion of neo-Eurasianism that draws heavily on the "ethnogenetic" teachings of Lev Gumilev for inspiration. In Ukraine, by contrast, the search for a usable *national* identity is on — since the Orange Revolution of 2004, and newly stimulated by the Euromaidan movement of 2013–2014, Ukrainians seem to sense the urgency of seizing this historical moment to define a national identity that is both ethno-cultural and inclusively civic.<sup>2</sup>

What does the contorted intellectual history of geopolitics have to do with Russia and Ukrainian literary categories today? It is useful to remind ourselves of the relationship between geopolitics, literature, and other forms of popular culture. In 1899, the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen coined the term "geopolitics" to draw attention to the territorial, physical-geographical dimensions of statehood and the relations between political states (Dobbs, 21). Kjellen's suggestion that the development of states can be "scientifically" understood as a factor of territorial and resource constraints and ambitions was swiftly taken up in academic circles in neighboring Germany in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, the influential teachings of Frederick Ratzel, a Professor of Geography at the University of Leipzig, posited a view of geopolitics that still characterizes — at its most simplistic level — the reputation of geopolitics as a hardheaded, non-sentimental, that's-the-way-the-world-works approach. According to Ratzel, the state can be compared to a super-organism, a quasi-

biological entity with an instinct for self-preservation and self-perpetuation. The state therefore ceaselessly seeks to expand its “living space” in order to ensure adequate territory and resources for growth. Since other strong and healthy states are engaged in the same struggle for existence, geopolitical dynamics on a global scale resemble an endless tug-of-war, with various states either in stages of growth or decline. In the interwar years, the idea of geopolitics fueled some of the most aggressive ideological regimes in Europe and elsewhere: Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Germany all used a geopolitical discourse of scarcity (on the one hand) and the need to secure physical, territorial resources as a way of mobilizing and militarizing in the 1930s (Dobbs, 25). In Japan, the remarkable association of a leading German geopolitical thinker, Karl Haushofer, and his Japanese colleagues led to the establishment of the Japanese Association for Geopolitics and the Geopolitics School at the University of Kyoto in 1930s (Dobbs, 28). Haushofer was deeply interested in Japan (where he stayed from 1908–1910) and one of his most important books was a study of Japanese territorial strategies in the Pacific (*Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans* (1924)). Ultimately, the association of geopolitics with the triumph of Nazism in Germany led to the nearly complete eclipse of the term (and its academic provinces) after WW II. In most of Europe and the United States, geopolitics was discredited as an intellectual discipline and rarely invoked as a strategic term until the closing decade of the Cold War.

During the same post-war decades, *geopolitika* fell into disfavor in the Soviet Union. Yet, despite official disapproval, one Russian academic continued to actively develop his own elaborate theory of how geographical environment, ethnic identity, and the “organism” of the state conform to inalienable “natural” laws of birth, growth, maturity, and decline. The Soviet Union’s most important geopolitical theorist was none other than Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev, the only son of two of Russia’s most renowned poets, Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) and Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921).<sup>3</sup> Lev Gumilev was born on October 12, 1912. His father was executed on suspicions of his allegiance to the Whites in 1921. Lev Gumilev’s relationship to his famous mother was fraught throughout his life, but the fact of their relationship, in the context of Russian-Soviet culture, obviously lent additional cache to Gumilev’s astounding rise to prominence as a major thinker in late Soviet and post-Soviet intellectual circles. In 1929, he moved with Akhmatova to Leningrad. In 1933, Gumilev was arrested for

the first time; in 1938, at the height of the purges, he was arrested again and sent to do hard labor, eventually spending 5 years in brutal conditions in the Soviet arctic. He was released in 1945, only to be arrested again in 1949, this time with a sentence of ten years (commuted only in 1956). In total, he spent 13 years in the gulag. According to Gumilev himself and those who knew him best, he regarded his time in camps as a kind of laboratory for observing humanity and developing his ideas (Bassin, 11). In Gumilev's theory, the powerful surge of "force or energy" that catapults certain individuals into crucial civilization-historical roles — what he called *passionarnost'* — arrives out of the blue (literally, through a form of cosmic energy) in unexpected moments.

After 1956, until his death in 1992, Lev Gumilev labored somewhat at the margins of official academia, as a research associate (*starshii nauchnyi sotrudnik*) on the Faculty of Geography at Leningrad State University (Bassin, 15). In almost all accounts, he is described as a touchy, irascible, abrasive character; in addition to the terrible weight of his past experiences, he also could (and did) complain of his status as a "scholarly and political outcast" (Bassin, 17). Nevertheless, in the last few years of his life, during Gorbachev's *perestroika*, his maverick theory of ethnogenesis and civilizational clashes moved increasingly into the respectable mainstream. In the 2000s, since Putin has established his increasingly long reign as leader of Russia, Gumilev's theories of how environment, ethnicity, and civilizational cycles "inevitably" fit together have become ubiquitous in Russia. In it is safe to say the Gumilevian theory provides a fundamental (pseudo-) scholarly pillar in Putin's official geopolitical ideology. His influence extends far beyond what he himself might have intended — or beyond how he intended his ideas to be interpreted. Gumilev's ideas have spread through contemporary Russian geopolitics and popular culture like an all-encompassing fog — *The Gumilev Mystique*, as Bassin calls it.<sup>4</sup>

Why is the "Gumilev mystique" important for our understanding of contemporary Russian popular literature, and the sharp contrast between today's Russian fiction and recent works by contemporary Ukrainian novelists? One might have expected a case of "clash of opposites" — in a time of direct political tensions, Ukrainian authors will seek to write "against Russia." Instead, as I will argue below, the literary cultures of the two countries — if one focuses on Ukraine's leading writers of "serious" literature — reflect two strikingly disconnected realms of geopolitical imagination. In Russia, we see the Putin

regime's geopolitical representations of self and other projected into a particular way of spatializing boundaries and dangers. These spatialized tropes (e. g. *ostrov Krym* is actually *nash*), are then reflected everywhere in mass media, cinema, novels, cartoons, schoolbooks, etc. In Ukraine, one would expect to see the same hierarchy of formal, practical, and popular geopolitics, i. e. formal geopolitical representations of self and other (e. g. is Ukraine "other" to Europe, or part of Europe) are projected into practical notions of how identity and territorial-political boundaries should overlap; at the level of popular imagination, geopolitical assumptions are recreated in film, toys, novels, etc.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, in Russia today, the overwhelmingly dominant geopolitical vision is one of a distinctive Eurasian, civilizational identity with corresponding claims to supranational territorial and resource interests. This vision is reflected in the plots and settings and characters of a series of widely read novelists. Ukrainian novelists do not write "against" this vision. They invoke fictional worlds with national, rather than civilizational, boundaries, and their fictional protagonists use different criteria to establish a "home" for a distinctly Ukrainian sense of identity.

### **Gumilev and the "Civilizational Turn" in Russia**

Like all grand, synthetic, and ultimately fairly malleable theories, Gumilev's theory of ethnogenesis is made up of many component parts, some of which even seem to contract each other. Since a detailed account of his theory is beyond the scope of one paper, the following synopsis can only provide a sense of the theory's appeal (to some) and its pernicious (to others) flaws. There are three key components to the theory of ethnogenesis. First is the fact of the *ethnos* (*ethnies*, plural) as the fundamental category of human identity and belonging. It is important to note Gumilev's contention that the ethnos is not at all the same thing as race — the constitution of an ethnos has nothing inherently to do with skin color, bone structure, or other racially determined features. The main point of an ethnos is its "behavioral stereotype." In other words, the ethnies arise, completely organically and naturally, as the human product of a given landscape or environment. Over biological-geological eras, human collectives have acquired ways of being, thinking, and behaving that are shaped by, and adapted to, the particular natural environment in which they emerged. In this way, says Gumilev, ethnicity is a "biophysical reality" (Bassin, 28), and "...ethnic belonging, which manifests itself in the human consciousness, is not

a product of this consciousness. It obviously reflects a dimension of the nature of a person that lies much deeper; [it is] a biological dimension located beyond consciousness and psychology, on the boundaries of the physiological.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, in Gumilev’s understanding, ethnic belonging is passed on from generation to generation genetically; yet the emphasis is not on the genetic transmission of basic phenotypical traits (hair color, eye shape, skin color, etc.), but on something much more enigmatic and glorious — the reproduction, through generations of a collective’s distinct way of being, of a sense of primordial belonging, an ethnic “behavioral stereotype” that separates *svoi* from *drugii*. Gumilev was necessarily fuzzy on the exact way in which a certain “ethnic” stamp to cultural behavior could be passed on genetically. On the other hand, it was precisely the daring challenge to Soviet dogma about the entirely social construction of human personality that held so much appeal. In the late Soviet Union, after three decades of Lysenkoism, biological explanations of human behavior had enormous “underground” appeal.<sup>7</sup>

The second key concept in Gumilev’s theory of ethnogenesis is the idea of *passionarnost’*. He needed to explain what propels the emergence and flourishing of a given ethnos at a given moment in history. After all, in the grand scheme of things, the world’s peoples (ethnies) all undergo an inevitable life cycle: they are born, they arise and flourish, and then eventually decline, ultimately lost to history. The life cycle of an ethnos is organic and inevitable, according to Gumilev, and yet some factor must be responsible for jolting a given ethnos into a phase of active expansion, strength, and power. In *The Gumilev Mystique*, Mark Bassin repeats the exotic origins of Gumilev’s *passionarnost’* idea (which came to him as he lay in appalling conditions on the floor of an overcrowded prison cell), and provides a full account of the idea’s development, always in productive tension with official Soviet dogmas of the time. The trope of the “eureka moment” in the gulag among scientists and artists who survived their terms — has appeared in other memoirs that are still slowly being uncovered.<sup>8</sup> *Passionarnost’* is a quality that animates the activity of certain ethnies; in particular, it may inhere in those extraordinary individuals who goad the development of their ethnos as it rises and expands its territory. If the initial inspiration for positing the impact of “passionary” leaders — certain extraordinary men who lead their ethnic collective into an era of high activity — came from the 1930s myth of the “new Soviet man” (a dynamic, extraordinary agent of social

progress), then in subsequent, post-gulag decades, Gumilev settled on very different explanation for “passionary” energy. By the 1960s, he had determined that the source of “passionary” energy on earth must also have biogeophysical origins — following Vernadskii, he followed the logic that we “live in a great galaxy, which has an effect on us, as do all the other factors determining the development of the biosphere” (Bassin, 49). *Passionarnost'* is transmitted through the cosmos, and in certain times and places, a whole ethnos may be subject to the kind of cosmic radiation that stimulates growth and activity. This particular aspect of Gumilev’s theory has been most appreciated for its intrinsic appeal as pop cultural motif — in science fiction stories, movies, and games, the triumphant group is infused with cosmic energy, or lead into battle by a hero who has been infused with galactic passionary energy.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Gumilev’s theory of ethnogenesis has implications that explicitly contribute to the resurgence of Eurasianist ideology in post-Soviet Russia. According to Gumilev’s “scientific” theory, ethnies exist in relationships to other ethnies that are inherently complementary, or, on the contrary, incompatible. This is not a matter of political will, social constructions of identity, or conscious education of the masses. One of the most pernicious aspects of Gumilev’s theory is that it claims to be biological and objective — it purports to describe processes that can be understood and used for strategic purposes, but are not subject to moral censure or directed social change. This aspect of Gumilevian theory has also been very useful for the new formulation of Russia’s geopolitical imperative.

The idea that the world is made up of multiple civilizations, and that these civilizations will clash (on a civilizational, rather than national level) has a long history. Logically, civilizational discourse will become stronger when former or alternative identity frameworks are weak or missing. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, Alexander Blok famously captured the impulse of a Eurasian civilizational identity in his poem “Scythians” (1918):

миллионы — вас. Нас — тьмы, и тьмы, и тьмы.  
Попробуйте, сразитесь с нами!  
Да, скифы — мы! Да, азиаты — мы  
С раскосыми и жадными очами! [...]

The “Eurasian idea,” like all forms of civilizational discourse, can be fit to an ideological agenda and used for political purposes.<sup>10</sup> Several analysts have

traced the rise of an explicit civilizational discourse in Russia since approximately 2008. Fabian Linde argues that by 2012, the overt embrace of a new kind of “civilizational nationalism” came to characterize Putin’s foreign and domestic policy.<sup>11</sup> In a nutshell, the civilizational discourse of Eurasian identity — whereby to be “Russian” is far more than a *national* category, but rather the linchpin (*sterzhen*) of a civilizational destiny — is a discourse that rejects alternative notions of Russia as a (potentially) Western or European nation. Linde quotes one of Putin’s clear and characteristic formulations of Russia’s civilizational identity in 2012:

First, we must strengthen Russia as a unique world civilization. We must remember that our country has traditionally always had regional diversity, ethno-cultural and religious diversity, and over the centuries this has been preserved, not suppressed. This diversity’s continued preservation today is not just the guarantee that Russia’s statehood has a solid foundation, but is also our great competitive advantage. No other country in the world has such a wealth of peoples and languages. ... At the same time, we are fully justified in speaking of the key cementing role played by the Russian language and by the Russian people and its great culture.<sup>12</sup>

In short, the “civilizational” worldview provides a basis for political action as well as a geopolitical paradigm that is reflected, amplified, or subverted in the sphere of cultural production. Russia today is still a nation of readers — and the best-selling literature by far consists of what we might call “civilizational soap operas.” These are quasi-historical, quasi-science fictional novels whose plots describe ethno-civilizational drama on a timescale that extends from the ancient past to the far future. The most successful literature of this sort is written for a young adult audience, with knowing nods to the Harry Potter formula. For instance, Polina Voloshinova’s novel *Marusya* (2009) follows the tumultuous journey of the titular heroine, who is a 14-year girl in the opening scene, which takes place on earth in the year 2020. Marusya, “a girl who always ends up in the middle of things” [девочка, с которой постоянно что-то случается]<sup>13</sup> is unwittingly drawn into a cosmic battle of opposing forces when she finds an immortality bracelet in her backpack. In and of itself, it is not surprising that a well-written cosmic fantasy of this sort would sell well — and *Marusya* has sold over 300,000 copies to date, in addition to maintaining a huge audience

of online fans and Facebook groups. What is unusual is the development of the “Etnogenez” literary franchise that followed this initial success.

*Marusya* became the first novel in wide-ranging series of “ethnogenetic” narratives that have been commissioned and orchestrated by a Russian media producer.<sup>14</sup> According to the book’s promotional material, the novels in the series, while authored by different people, all follow an overarching narrative theme:

“*Marusya* is the first book in the Ethnogenetics epos, a world in which history is driven by the actions of great passionaries, where fates are determined by the will of the Universe, and where a single step can change the course of all humanity. You will find lost worlds and their secrets, sacred symbols, cosmic aliens, and travel through time and space — through the present, past, and future” (my translation).<sup>15</sup>

If mainstream Russian literature, and the vast majority of readers who buy these blockbusters, is willing to “buy” the magic of civilizational-nationalist narratives, what comprises oppositional literature? For writers who categorically reject the meta-narratives, the Gumilevian obsession with civilizational greatness, and the widely noted replacement of real news with “fake news” in the Russian media, what new artistic resources are brought into play? The most recent article by Mark Lipovetsky makes the case that “small forms” and “minor genres” are back, in a 21<sup>st</sup> century, technologically-mediated iteration of what the formalist Tynianov diagnosed a century ago. Generally, in order to reject grand, teleological, historical narratives, writers “rediscover” the expressive power of small, fragmentary, intimate forms:

“Here, in these letters, we find the most flexible and most needed phenomena that with incredible force highlighted new constructive principles: reticence, fragmentariness, hints. The ‘domestic’ small form of the letter motivated the introduction of petty detail and stylistic devices as opposed to / in contrast to the ‘grandiose’ devices of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>16</sup>

In the increasingly oppressive and controlled sphere of public discourse in Putin’s Russia, non-conformist and oppositional writers have found themselves confronted with a bizarre new enemy: their own postmodernist techniques turned against them. In other words, now that the conservative-nationalist media

has cheerfully adopted the techniques of pastiche, satire, performance art, and “fake news” to present the public with a certain version of “reality,” artists are seeking new modes of “estrangement” to counter what many see as the most comprehensive and ubiquitous phenomenon of mass “estrangement” since the “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” of Stalinism (in Boris Groys’ formulation). Lipovetsky analyzes the new semantic power that imbues small forms of internet poetry and docu-theater, and makes a tentative prediction that the new “constructive principle” — of piecing together documentary fragments and moments of affect (emotional punches) — will seek to invade other genres (Lipovetsky, 203). But so far, Russian artists are relying on micro-forms as “the most flexible and most needed phenomena” to counteract the hegemonic narratives of civilizational geopolitics.

### **Oksana Zabuzhko, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets***

Is it at all justified or useful to juxtapose the rough description of the Russian literary landscape (above) to a single recent Ukrainian novel? Oksana Zabuzhko (b. 1960) holds the status of one of Ukraine’s most acknowledged and widely translated contemporary authors. Her writing represents a version of Ukrainian nationalism that is antithetical to civilizational discourse, but is not reduced to a simple “pro-European” stance. In the final section of this paper, I will argue that *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* (Музей покинутих секретів, 2009) usefully highlights the formal differences that might characterize the gap between two literary cultures. The formal features of this novel point to a completely different set of ideological concerns and literary responses than those we have identified in Russia. It is too early to say how the divergence between Russian and Ukrainian literatures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will look from a distant perspective. In the present moment, however, we can try to make sense of Zabuzhko’s “large form” (a novel of over 700 pages), her unusual deployment of sex scenes, her unapologetically intellectual heroine, and the multiple voices that contribute to the task of defining a post-Orange Revolution Ukrainian identity.

The heroine of Zabuzhko’s novel is Daryna Goshchynska, a successful investigative journalist and TV personality who came of age just as the USSR collapsed. In the relative chaos of the 1990s, Daryna seemed to have every advantage: fiercely intelligent and not shy about using her obvious physical beauty, she made her way up the ranks in television, eventually producing and

anchoring a show called *Diogenes' Lantern*, which exposed viewers to the forgotten lives of “real” Ukrainian heroes. In Daryna’s clear ethical vision, heroes are men and women who withstand the pressure to conform, compromise, or simply “forget” uncomfortable truths. Early on in the novel, we are treated to a full “replay” of the interview she conducts with one of her heroes — who is also her best friend. The reader (put in the seat of the putative TV audience) sees two women discussing the recent successful opening of the interviewee’s art exhibition. It’s a utopian moment: on this channel, at least, it is possible for a female anchor to choose as her guest and “hero” a glamorous honey-blond in her middle-aged years, who fearlessly explains the point of “secrets”: a game that little girls used to play by burying shiny objects covered by a piece of broken glass under the dirt, so that the initiated might dig up the dirt in the right spot and find the magical “window” onto the secret objects. We see how this conceit has been transformed by the contemporary artist’s tools into a visually sparkling set of installations (selling well in European galleries), but also how the whole thing is not a “conceit” at all, because the interviewer and interviewee openly discuss the reality behind the “secrets” game (little girls watched their grandmas burying icons and books in the ground in the 1930s and 40s). Daryna’s TV show could be envied in any progressive society: it makes *discussing ideas* and *seeking truth* seem both natural and contagiously glamorous. Before long, however, Daryna’s friend is mysteriously killed in a car accident, the country as a whole lurches towards compromised elections, all-too-familiar (from Soviet times) political and social reflexes lock into place, and all the fragile freedoms Daryna’s generation thought they had are put into jeopardy. In a characteristic passage, we hear Daryna’s thoughts on why the “collapse of communism” could not guarantee, in and of itself, that the new generation would grow into a democracy:

We were well-fed, well-groomed guinea pigs, with glossy fur — those of us who managed to find our way to the flood of money currents — we had no instinct for danger, and that, perhaps, was the main mark of our generation: bare as bones, armed with nothing but our parents’ blessing of go-ahead-kiddo-and-you’ll-have-the-good-life; we stuck our heads into the trap happily and with an easy heart, even with a sense of our own relevance; we took pride in our glossy fur, in being paid, and being paid well — for being talented and insightful, of course what else? — and

then it was too late. We went along, thinking in our naivete, that we were shaping the new television landscape — we measured our ratings thought up new shows, and, like children, felt unbelievably cool when we said “in Ukrainian for the first time” — and what we really did was dance on blood, and that unavenged, unreprised blood ate at us from the inside, insidious as lead-laced water (272).

Instead, the novel follows the heroine and her lover (Adrian) as they move through a painful but endlessly exhilarating landscape of “abandoned-secrets,” trying to find and uncover the story of Adrian’s great-aunt.

Daryna first becomes aware of Aunt Geltsia’s existence before she meets Adrian. At the time, she is in the process of ending an affair with her married co-worker. When this man pulls out a photograph of five Ukrainian Insurgent Army soldiers — a black-and-white picture taken in the forest in 1947 — Daryna spontaneously realizes that she must find out the story of the woman (the *female* UIA soldier!) in the picture. In this scene, she also spontaneously, against her own will or desire, comes to orgasm when her co-worker moves to arouse her. He has no inkling that her arousal has everything to do with the picture, and nothing to do with his efforts. The extended scene of sex is conveyed entirely from the perspective of the woman’s mind, which is racing beside and eventually beyond her own body, and it is ultimately a way of joining (copulating) the heroine and the reader in a quest. We are now complicit in an act that points the heroine towards her moral-intellectual journey:

I just *could not* leave the photograph with Artem. It was *mine* — it had become mine. And not just because I happened to have been thoroughly fucked on top of it without putting up much resistance. Instead, I didn’t resist because at that moment I was possessed by *someone else’s will*. That’s what it had felt like (43).

Either through coincidence, or through the will of the enigmatic woman in the photograph, Daryna meets and falls in love with the UIA soldier’s great-nephew. In a series of dreams punctuated by enabling and (this time) loving sex with Daryna, Adrian channels the experiences of his female ancestor as she fought against the occupying Red Army in Western Ukrainian territory after the official end of WW II. The vivid “history” that comes to life in these dreams allows Daryna to unravel the mystery of the UIA woman, and eventually complete

a documentary film about her life. Here again, the way in which the bodies of the hero and heroine desire each other as the dreams unfold serves also to connect the reader to the reality of the lives lived by people whose history has been purposely obliterated. In Zabuzhko's novel, sex can be a kind of conduit that allows the ghosts of the past to come back into present. The slightly phantasmagorical return of the dead (through dreams, mediated by love) allows the protagonists of this kind of novel to grab the chance (and the obligation) to finally expose the "secrets" of buried national history. In this way, the dead are resurrected from their anonymous mass graves, or from the hastily burned archives, and someone resolves to tell their story for the next generation. Thus, Zabuzhko's "undead" are not Zombies that we can't pacify, but memories that we are called upon to resolve. The resolution of a difficult and intentionally obfuscated past requires time and attention to detail, however, which is reflected in the length of this novel and its exuberant (not without humor) evocation of material and psychological detail.

The relatively positive arc of the story portrayed so far — intrepid female Ukrainian reporter manages against all odds to resurrect a tiny piece of buried history and make a documentary film — is obviously not the whole story. The odds are formidable, and the obstacles to achieving a genuine Ukrainian independence are real. In one telling scene, Daryna meets her deceased friend's powerful ex-husband for a late-night meal in a restaurant he seems to own (as he owns many assets). Vadym has the kind of shortness of breath that afflicts "well-nourished men past their prime;" Daryna is on the verge of tears because she knows the topic they have met to discuss — the introduction of a new TV "game show" that is really a front for a sex-trafficking ring — will not go well.

Crying's the last thing I need right now, but my nose tickles treacherously, and I begin to breathe hard, like Vadym, hard and fast. We sit facing each other the two of us, and snuffle like hedgehogs on a narrow path. [...] What a nasty feeling this is, to know a crime is about to happen, and not to be able to stop it (486).

Vadym then delivers a lengthy explanation of how and why "political technologies" have come to replace the old-fashioned notion that politics are driven by actual *ideas*. In his logic, sex-trafficking cannot be stopped, or even exposed, because in the realm of post-Soviet politics, there is no "idea," only the "struggle

for power” (491). Vadym’s elaborate speech on the “struggle for power” principle is in fact a tour de force, and could be usefully read as a quasi-intellectual justification for the kind of victories that take place in the “Etnogenez” novels (recall: “history is driven by great passionaries, and fates are determined by the will of the Universe”). In Zabuzhko’s handling, however, the material and psychological details of the present and the past insist on confusing the “will of the Universe,” and Vadym’s assault on Daryna’s alternative system of values and beliefs is ultimately belittled, as “two hedgehogs snuffling past each other on a narrow path.”

To conclude, *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* represents a mode of constructing fictional worlds which differs sharply from the prevalent trend in Russian popular literature, but also differs in form and voice from the efforts of non-conformist Russian writers to find new impetus in “small forms.” Zabuzhko’s novel, like those of her compatriots Yuri Andurkhovych, Serhiy Zhadan, and Andrei Kurkov, exists in antithesis to the “civilizational nationalism” that has come to dominate Russian geopolitics and much of Russian mass entertainment. It does not counter Russian “Eurasianism” with an alternative civilizational myth; rather, Ukrainian literature today is avowedly concerned with its role in articulating a new *national* identity for independent Ukraine. As several critics have pointed out, what seems to be emerging, at least tentatively, is a vision of a civic national identity (Ukraine for Ukrainians of many voices and ethnicities), rather than an ethno-cultural national identity that excludes non-ethnic Ukrainians. In the meantime, we can hope that in the “clash of fictions,” writers and their readers may find inspiration for a more meaningful encounter than the proverbial “clash of civilizations.”

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### Notes

- 1 Ukrainian scholars are well aware of the importance of national literary histories continue to play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (re)construction of nationhood (Pavlyshyn "Literary History" 80). Since the so-called Orange Revolution protesting election fraud in Ukraine in 2004, popular rejection of Russian political influence in Ukraine has grown, culminating in the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014. This article concentrates on recent (since 2008) literary phenomena in both Russia and Ukraine.
- 2 In the first post-Soviet decade, and arguably well into the second, various narratives of Ukrainian nationalism have been embraced by some of the people some of the time, but narrowly ethno-nationalist constructions of identity have been vigorously contested (see Shevel "The Battle for Historical Memory," and MacBride "Who's Afraid of Ukrainian Nationalism?" for overviews of recent scholarship on this topic. For more on the dangers of intolerant nationalist narratives, see Dubasevych ("Ukraine's Sleepwalking"). For a (positive) argument on the growing support for a broadly inclusive, civic national identity, see Pavlyshyn ("Literary History").
- 3 Gumilev himself did not interest himself with "geopolitics" at all, in the sense of practical, contemporary ideological maneuvering. Rather, he clarified the relationship between geography, ethnicity, and the struggle between civilizational groups in way that has been adapted to contemporary geopolitical thinking.
- 4 Mark Bassin's book provides the fullest account in English of Gumilev's life and work.
- 5 The tripartite schema of geopolitical culture — as theorized by Gearoid O Tuathail — moves from (1) the "formal" level of ideological imagination to (2) the "practical" level of drawing/enacting maps to (3) the popular level where geopolitical assumptions are absorbed into everyday images, representations and artifacts. See Dodds, 42.

- 6 This quote can be found in Gumilev, *Konets i vnov'nachalo: Populiarnye lekstii po narodovedeniiu*, Moscow, Rol'f (2001); translated in Bassin, 28.
- 7 See, for instance, Howell ("The Liberal Gene").
- 8 The geneticist Vladimir Pavlovich Efroimson, while serving a term of hard labor in the notorious Dzhzhkazgan camps, later recalled a key piece in understanding the heredity of immune responses "came to me while I was dragging a wheelbarrow to the mortar station" (Howell, 367). Genrikh Altshuller also describes his "eureka moment" in prison (see Howell "Genrikh Altshuller"). Of Gumilev, a colleague wrote "his school for working out the theory of ethnogenesis on the basis of people's behavior [was in the camps]; in the camps he could observe the full variety of Russian reality" (Bassin, 11).
- 9 See Mark Bassin and Irina Kotkina ("The Etnogenez Project").
- 10 Samuel Huntington's 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations" is an example of an American political scientist's interpretation of how civilizational identities control the global world order.
- 11 Linde, 606.
- 12 Linde, 607; quoted from "Meeting of Council for Interethnic Relations," August 24, 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4324>.
- 13 [http://loveread.ec/view\\_global.php?id=2370](http://loveread.ec/view_global.php?id=2370) accessed 01/10/2017.
- 14 For detailed information on Konstantin Rylkov's involvement in the producing the "Etnogenez" series, see Mark Bassin and Irina Kotkina.
- 15 *Мируся* — первая книга эпоса «Етногенез», мира, где историю вершат поступки великих пассионариев, где судьбы определяет воля Вселенной, где один-единственный шаг способен изменить развитие всего человечества. Вас ждут затерянные миры и их секреты, сакральные пришельцы из космоса, путешествия во времени и пространстве — в настоящее, прошлое, и будущее. [http://loveread.ec/view\\_global](http://loveread.ec/view_global).
- 16 Tynianov, Yurii. *Poetika. Istoriiia literatury. Kino* / E. Toddes, A. Chudakov, and M. Chudakova (Eds.). Moskva: Nauka, 1977. P. 265. Translated and quoted in Lipovetsky, 191.